

# Strengthening Afghan Women's Civil Society to Secure Afghanistan's Future:

## An Analysis of New U.S. Assistance Programs

*By*

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Our mission is to advocate international economic policies and human rights that support women worldwide in ending poverty in their lives, communities and nations. We believe women's lack of participation in economic and trade policies stunts economies, holds back countries, and makes ending poverty nearly impossible. To address this, our nonpartisan coalition was created in 1998 to offer positive alternatives to current U.S. foreign policy and push for innovative aid programs to ensure that women around the world are not forgotten, and that their struggles and progress are supported by the powerful organizing efforts of American citizens.

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Most of all, we thank and salute the women who form the backbone of women's civil society in Afghanistan.

# Preface

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Sitting outside a women's literacy class on the outskirts of Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, I met Wajma, the 11-year-old daughter of one of the students. Through my translator, I learned that Wajma, who had four sisters and three brothers, wanted more than anything to continue her education, which was abruptly ended by the Taliban when she was in second grade.

That was in June 2003. I wonder where Wajma is now. And I wonder what her life will be like in 20 years.

In making the case for the war in Afghanistan, President George W. Bush promised that the U.S. would restore the rights and dignity of Afghan women. Three years after the Taliban was overthrown in 2001, major strides have been achieved. Today, Afghan women have been granted the right to vote, and girls' enrollment in primary school is the highest it has ever been. Yet much more work remains.

Has the U.S. promise made education a reality for Wajma?

Development, by nature, takes time. It will take years to overcome the development challenges faced by Afghan women who suffered under the brutal Taliban regime. Following the Taliban's ouster, the international community came together to rebuild Afghanistan. But one day, when the international aid organizations scale back rebuilding efforts and move on to other pressing global challenges, local civil society will take over responsibility for the development process. For that reason, one of the most important long-term investments the international donor community can make is in building the capacity of local civil society organizations, especially organizations led by Afghan women.

This paper is published just months after the U. S. announced two U.S. assistance programs to strengthen Afghan civil society – the Literacy and Community Empowerment Program (LCEP) and the Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (I-PACS). It analyzes and assesses the assistance programs and will serve as a helpful resource to NGOs implementing the programs in the field.

The paper also offers key U.S. decision makers and NGO representatives a look at how the U.S. can support and build women's civil society in Afghanistan. We hope this paper will be helpful as you consider the U.S.'s role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Please visit the Women's Edge Coalition website for more information on Afghan women and U.S. foreign policy at [www.womensedge.org](http://www.womensedge.org).

Ritu Sharma  
*Co-Founder and President*  
Women's Edge Coalition

# 1. Executive Summary

In making the case for the war in Afghanistan in October 2001, the Bush Administration pledged to restore the rights and dignity of Afghan women who had suffered nearly 23 years of conflict characterized by the systematic repression of women. Before the invasion by the Russians in 1979 and the ensuing civil war, Afghan women were actively engaged in public life – many were doctors, lawyers, and teachers. However, as

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local forces battled outside invaders and each other for political control, rhetoric around women's appropriate role in society became fodder for building political support. Consequently, women slowly began to see their rights stripped away. The

subjugation of women escalated to new heights when the Taliban regime ruled the country from 1996 through 2001: women and girls were forced to stay inside their homes and prohibited from going to school and work. America's military intervention in the country and the promised liberation of women represented a new page in Afghanistan's history.

Three years after the pledge, while Afghan women have certainly benefited from overall U.S. rebuilding efforts, only a small portion of U.S. international assistance for



the reconstruction of Afghanistan is specifically designated for women's and girls' programs. And, an even smaller percentage of overall U.S. spending in Afghanistan has funded local women's organizations. From fiscal years 2002 to 2004, nearly \$75 million in grants from the US Agency for International Development (USAID) were devoted to Afghan civil society groups. Of that total, Afghan women's civil society groups received \$3.8 million or just five percent.<sup>1</sup>

Following years of war and civil strife, Afghan women's civil society is now a key player in the rebuilding process and in improving the status of women in Afghanistan. Armed with personal knowledge of the Afghan culture and its communities, Afghan women leaders and groups are best positioned to provide local women with long-term development. Run by fellow Afghans, local women's organizations inherently have a vested interest in the advancement of women in their country.

However, many local Afghan women's organizations simply lack the resources and skills to be sustainable and to meet the significant development challenges in their communities. Against all odds, women's civil society organizations are responding to the needs of their community with very limited assistance from the international community. Thus, increased U.S.

international assistance will need to be directed to Afghan women's civil society organizations to build their capacity to help millions of Afghan women and their families realize their full potential. In addition to investments in Afghan civil society, targeted international development assistance in health, education, job skills, and economic opportunities will be essential to the country's reconstruction.

**...increased U.S. international assistance will need to be directed to Afghan women's civil society organizations to build their capacity to help millions of Afghan women and their families realize their full potential.**

In late 2004, the U.S. government announced two newly-created programs to strengthen and build the capacity of civil society in Afghanistan: the two-year, \$10 million Literacy and Community Empowerment Program (LCEP) and the three-year, \$15.6 million Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (I-PACS). LCEP seeks to bolster development in rural communities by empowering women and young people through training in literacy and life skills for income generation and to strengthen local democratically elected institutions called Community Development Councils (CDCs). I-PACS

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aims to build the capacity and support the programmatic work of women's civil society, develop a legal framework for how NGOs operate in the country, and create a strategy for sustaining Afghan civil society. The new assistance programs show promise and potentially offer solutions to the reported needs of the women's civil society sector. Ultimately, their success will depend on how well they are implemented in the

field, but the plans represent an important first step.

The Women's Edge Coalition initiated this policy paper to offer recommendations on building and sustaining a strong Afghan women's civil society. It is intended as a resource to officials in U.S. government agencies, congressional leaders and staffers, and representatives of Afghan and international nongovernmental organizations.

This paper analyzes LCEP and I-PACS, forecasts their potential impact, and provides recommendations on both programs. It also offers extensive background on women's civil society and assesses the needs of Afghan women's nongovernmental organizations and community groups.

Following extensive research, including in-person, telephone, and online dialogues with Afghan women civil society leaders, leading experts on Afghan women's civil society, and U.S. government officials, the Women's Edge Coalition offers specific recommendations for the LCEP and I-PACS programs as well as general recommendations for strengthening Afghan women's civil society and increasing the impact of these programs.

## **Policy Recommendations**

### **Literacy and Community Empowerment Program (LCEP) Recommendations**

*The U.S. Congress should:*

- ▼ Support and expand LCEP in future years, assuming that monitoring and evaluation efforts indicate that it is accomplishing its goals.
- ▼ Complement LCEP with a well-funded effort to cultivate the leaders and NGOs currently working in Afghanistan.

*USAID should:*

- ▼ Hold implementing institutions accountable for follow-through on LCEP's plans to use local women's NGOs as implementing partners.
- ▼ Avoid replicating and undermining the efforts of existing NGOs by ensuring that local women's groups with the necessary capacity have the opportunity to carry out aspects of the LCEP.
- ▼ Coordinate with similar bilateral and multilateral efforts to avoid replication and seize opportunities for collaboration.

### **Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (I-PACS) Recommendations**

*The U.S. Congress should:*

- ▼ Robustly fund I-PACS in future years, after monitoring and evaluation efforts indicate the initiative is accomplishing its goals.
- ▼ Require USAID to provide an annual report detailing the percentage of small grants funding, technical assistance, and capacity-building services that reached local NGOs. This information should accurately document the amount of funds devoted to women-led groups and men-led groups and formally registered NGOs and community groups in each province.
- ▼ Require that at least 50 percent of the available small grants funding, technical assistance, and capacity-building services are devoted to women-led groups, if the first annual report reveals that less than half of the groups benefiting from I-PACS are women-led.
- ▼ Require that at least 50 percent of the available small grants funding, technical assistance, and capacity-building services be devoted to established NGOs, as opposed to other types of women's civil society organizations, if less than half of the groups benefiting from I-PACS are established NGOs.

*USAID should:*

- ▼ Release I-PACS funding as early as possible in the U.S. budget cycle to give sufficient time to thoughtfully implement the program.
- ▼ Create an Afghan women's advisory council to advise the organization managing I-PACS.
- ▼ Ensure that I-PACS participants and other women's civil society groups are being prepared to become conventional USAID grant recipients by training Afghan civil society groups in the skills they need to meet USAID requirements.
- ▼ Convene a group of women civil society leaders to discuss gender-specific barriers to the national NGO registration process.
- ▼ Incorporate a substantive gender analysis component into all civil society assessment activities.

### General Recommendations

*The U.S. government should put resources into efforts to:*

- ▼ Create a mechanism for coordinating the work of all civil society groups including NGOs, CDCs, and other groups to promote cooperation and communication and to prevent replication of

projects. This may involve strengthening an existing mechanism or organization and/or creating a new approach.

- ▼ Develop regional advocacy networks by creating a program to link Community Development Councils.
- ▼ Create a systematic and large-scale women's leadership program that may include, but should not consist exclusively of, international exchange programs and scholarships.
- ▼ Finance the development of a strategic plan based on the I-PACS analysis of the civil society sector and commit sufficient resources to implement the plan. The strategic plan may include activities such as:
  - Promoting the autonomy of civil society by encouraging the government to enforce legislation and relevant provisions of the Afghan Constitution that protect the role of civil society.
  - Expanding the media reach to ensure that people throughout the country have access to information, and working with the Afghan government to promote freedom of press.



## 2. Introduction

Devastated by decades of war, poverty, and oppressive regimes, Afghanistan has become one of the world's poorest countries. Some 70 percent of Afghans scrape by on a subsistence income of less than \$2 a day.<sup>2</sup> And the long history of invasions by foreign countries has left the country's economic, political and social structures in near shambles.<sup>3</sup>

Afghan women are among the most vulnerable in the country. Since the invasion by the Soviet Union in 1979, women have been the victims, and often the pawns, of a

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continuous series of violent power struggles that have ravaged the country. Nearly 23 years of intense conflict were capped by the notorious Taliban regime that ruled brutally from 1996 through 2001. Women and girls bore the brunt of Taliban oppression. They were forced to stay inside their homes unless accompanied by a male relative and could not go to school or a job. In the absence of

accessible health care, pregnancy and childbirth became increasingly life-threatening for women, resulting in Afghanistan having the second-highest maternal mortality rate in the world. The Taliban further jeopardized women's physical safety in and outside of their homes with the legalization of violence against women.

With the ouster of the Taliban in 2001, lawlessness and lack of security forces outside of Kabul, the Afghan capital, make daily life threatening for most women. Today, regional tribal commanders control vast swaths of the country, and Taliban loyalists terrorize many living outside of Kabul. Additionally, sexual violence against Afghan women has surged, and women and girls are increasingly subjected to rapes, beatings, kidnappings and other forms of violence and intimidation. Violence and insecurity remain serious impediments to helping Afghan women and rebuilding the country.

Despite these challenges, women are now beginning to redefine their roles and reclaim their place in society. In

the reconstruction of this wartorn Central Asian nation, women have been engaged in peace talks and the rewriting of the constitution. About 20 percent of voting delegates to the Constitutional *loya jirga*, the decision-making body responsible for ratifying Afghanistan's new constitution, were women. And scores of women voted for the first time in a democratic election for the president of Afghanistan in October 2004. The new Afghan constitution makes education for children compulsory through grade 9,<sup>4</sup> enabling six out of 10 girls to now attend school.<sup>5</sup> And Afghan women in rural communities are slowly gaining access to critical basic health care services, such as trained midwives, clinics, obstetric kits, and life-saving medicines. More than 2.5 million people in 21 provinces now have access to basic health care; 90 percent of the recipients are women and children.<sup>6</sup>

**While milestones have been achieved, the development challenges facing Afghan women are daunting.**

### Women in the Context of Afghanistan's Development Challenge

While milestones have been achieved, the development challenges facing Afghan women are daunting. With an illiteracy rate of nearly 80 percent, women are in desperate need of access to culturally appropriate, high-quality education.<sup>7</sup> Health care is out of reach for most Afghan women, as only 12 percent have access to basic health services.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, Afghanistan continues to have the second highest maternal mortality rate in the world, with 1,600 mothers dying per 100,000 live births.<sup>9</sup>

Having been largely confined to the house during the Taliban regime, few women possess the skills needed to compete for jobs, especially in a fragile economy where work is scarce. The lack of employment opportunities is especially devastating to Afghan widows, who often bear the responsibility of supporting their children and elderly relatives. After more than two decades of war, unofficial estimates put the number of war widows at up to 70,000 in Kabul alone. Nearly all female-headed households lack sufficient resources to meet a basic food intake of 2,100 calories per day.<sup>10</sup>

Although the new Afghan constitution guarantees women the right to vote and run for office, few have the resources and skills needed to make their government responsive to their needs. Women rarely have the opportunity to make informed decisions in the political process about their representation, due to limited access to information about the candidates as well as traditionally held beliefs that men should guide women family members' political decisions.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, many of the women elected to the *loya jirga*, Afghanistan's parliamentary body, assert that the combination of their limited political experience and men's negative attitudes toward their involvement curbed the impact of their participation.<sup>12</sup>

Women's political and economic constraints are thus compounded by the gender stereotypes and

***While the official number of Afghan women's civil society organizations is unknown due to insufficient record keeping, approximately 2,400 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) – both local and international – are registered with the Afghan Ministry of Planning.***

discrimination that pervade Afghan society. Clinging to Taliban-era edicts rendering women second-class citizens, conservative leaders of Afghan society are loath to allow women to take advantage of their newly codified rights. Yet if Afghanistan is to evolve and become a more inclusive society, men's attitudes and stereotypes about women will have to change.

To a great extent, Afghanistan's future hinges on women overcoming their development challenges. Because a substantial number of men died while fighting the Soviets and later the *Mujahadeen* or armed resistance fighters, women comprise 60 percent of the population. The sustainability of Afghanistan's new democracy demands the widespread acceptance of women's political equality and effective participation. Similarly, Afghanistan's economy cannot reach its full potential until women are able to receive the tools and training they need to engage in an increasingly globalized economy.

### **Afghan Women's Civil Society in Reconstruction Efforts**

Afghan women leaders are uniquely able to reach other Afghan women in the development process. Armed with

personal knowledge of the culture and trusted by the communities they serve, they are able to go to places that are not safe for foreigners. They can provide culturally appropriate services such as health care, education, and job skills training to people living in remote and hard-to-reach regions. As insiders, Afghan women's groups have leverage that other groups do not. Whereas cultural change instigated by foreigners can be perceived as cultural imperialism, when initiated by locals, it is part of the natural evolution of a national culture. This evolution is particularly key with respect to changing women's status in society.

While Afghan women leaders could potentially provide critically needed services on a short-term basis by working on behalf of the Afghan government or international NGOs, neither situation maximizes the long-term impact of their potential contribution. Currently, foreign governments and international NGOs are heavily engaged in moving the country's development forward, but inevitably Afghan civil society organizations and private sector firms will be required to meet the long-term needs of the Afghan people. They will need to have the capacity to run organizations and deliver services. Additionally, as the burden of governance and service provision increases, the Afghan government will be forced to make hard decisions about the allocation of limited resources and which populations to serve first. To ensure that adequate support and attention continue to flow to women's development priorities, women's civil society will have to engage in advocacy. Women's groups will need to be ready and equipped to meet the demands of the Afghan people, and will be best prepared to do so, if they begin gaining experience and building skills today.

Afghan women's civil society groups already have begun to contribute to national development efforts. While the official number of Afghan women's civil society organizations is unknown due to insufficient record keeping, approximately 2,400 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) – both local and international —

***Currently, foreign governments and international NGOs are heavily engaged in moving the country's development forward, but inevitably Afghan civil society organizations and private sector firms will be required to meet the long-term needs of the Afghan people.***

are registered with the Afghan Ministry of Planning. Afghan women run many of these organizations and tackle development challenges such as basic literacy training, income-oriented vocational skills training, and very basic health services and health education. Some local organizations partner with international NGOs to implement microcredit programs in addition to rights awareness and gender education to begin changing the harmful cultural practices that limit women.<sup>13</sup> Women engaged in community groups often make decisions and set priorities on the development needs of their local communities.

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Yet for all of their efforts, women's civil society organizations face major obstacles. Insufficient financial support for programmatic work limits the number of projects groups are able to undertake. At the same time, women leaders attest to their need for training and skills development. To ensure that women's groups can transform into fully operational organizations with the expertise to effectively meet the needs of their beneficiaries, there must be simultaneous efforts to support their programmatic work, develop their delivery capacity, and instill norms of accountability and transparency.

Donor nations such as the U.S. have the opportunity to make an important long-term contribution to Afghanistan by investing in women's civil society. In addition to promoting accountability and transparency, donor investments can unleash the full potential of women's involvement in the development process by helping women obtain the skills needed to contribute to a capable and principled civil society.

### **Organization of the Paper**

This paper is principally concerned with U.S. government efforts to build women's civil society in Afghanistan. It begins by examining the types of women's civil society groups in Afghanistan and calls attention to their most pressing development needs. The paper then discusses what the U.S. has done for women's civil society to date and explains why its support for women's civil society has been insufficient.

The paper further describes and evaluates two new international assistance programs, the Literacy and Community Empower Program (LCEP) and the Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (I-PACS), which will be implemented in 2005. These two programs are the cornerstones of the upcoming U.S. effort to build women's civil society in Afghanistan. The paper evaluates each program individually and forecasts how likely it is to serve women's civil society organizations and its beneficiaries. It then assesses whether the two programs will meet the overall needs of Afghan women's civil society in general.

This paper aims to speak to policymakers in U.S. government agencies including the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the government body responsible for administering the U.S. program in Afghanistan. The paper also intends to be a resource for the U.S. Congress, which is responsible for funding the U.S. program in Afghanistan. It further seeks to be helpful to NGOs implementing the new U.S. assistance programs, LCEP and I-PACS.

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### **Methodology**

This paper was developed through extensive research and a series of in-person, telephone, and online dialogues with Afghan women civil society leaders, leading experts on Afghan women's civil society, and U.S. government officials. With few notable exceptions, the individuals interviewed for this paper presented a common perspective on the needs of women's civil society in Afghanistan.

Afghan women civil society leaders interviewed for this paper included several Afghanistan-based members of the Policy Council on Afghan Women (Afghan Women's Network, Afghan Institute of Learning, W.O.M.A.N.) as well as Afghan women working with the Noor Education Center, the World Food Program, and GTZ, a German international development agency. Their conclusions and

recommendations were reiterated by the more than 40 organizations represented at a meeting held in October 2004 in Kabul. At the September meeting, USAID officials and nongovernmental organizations extensively discussed the women's civil society sector. Their conclusions were affirmed by U.S.-based members of the Policy Council on Afghan Women, including Sima Wali of Refugee Women International; Toc Dunlap and Barbara Lessnau of Creating Hope International; Masuda Sultan of Women for Afghan Women; Mary Robinson of the U.S. Afghan Reconstruction Council (USARC); Jenny Perlman of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children; Farida Azizi of Vital Voices; and Jennifer Green of Peace X Peace.

The recommendations and perspectives in the paper were also drawn from feedback from members of the Agency Coordinating Body For Afghan Relief's (ACBAR) Gender Advisory Advocacy Group, which includes leading experts such as Carol LeDuc of the World Bank; Sultan Maqsood Fazel of Christian Aid; Saeeda Hashemi of Norwegian Church Aid; and Palwasha Hassan of

Rights and Democracy. Other notable experts contributing to this paper include Nancy Dupree of the ACBAR Resource and Information Center (ARIC); Robert Klujver of the Foundation for Society and Culture; Homira Nassery of the UNDP; Lauryn Oates of Rights and Democracy; and Malaly Volpi of the Policy Council on Afghan Women.

The Women's Edge Coalition requested information on the overall U.S. assistance program in Afghanistan and the plans for the Literacy and Community Empowerment Program (LCEP) specifically for this paper. USAID provided figures and data on U.S. international assistance to Afghan women's civil society. The State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) and the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA), and the U.S. Afghan Women's Council also provided information about State Department funding. General information on the Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (I-PACS) was extracted from the federal grants website.<sup>14</sup>

## Box 1

### Afghan Women's Training Center Expands Horizon for Women and Girls<sup>15</sup>

During the Soviet occupation and later the Taliban era, women and girls, deprived of an education, saw little hope of ever attending school. A local Afghan women's NGO, Galaxy Women's Training Center, based in Herat, western Afghanistan, offers women and girls in that province a glimmer of hope in fulfilling that dream.

Galaxy Women's Training Center is one of the few educational institutions providing women and girls with training to improve their chances of employment, economic independence, and female empowerment. The center offers skills training in literacy, English, computing, science, and fine arts, as well as office and other vocational skills.

Today, 800 students between ages 10 and 40 attend classes at the training center. And an onsite pre-school facility allows mothers with young children to attend classes.

"It has made a real difference in our lives," said Razia, a student at the center. "If this center was not here, we would not be able to learn these skills."

The training center also enables Afghan women with advanced skills to teach other women. During the Soviet occupation, Laaha, a computer teacher, fled Afghanistan with her family to Iran, where she grew up and received an education. Nearly 25 years later, after the Taliban fell in 2001, she returned to Herat to teach at the Galaxy Women's Training Center.

"I'm happy to come back to Herat to transfer my skills and knowledge to these girls so that they can contribute to the reconstruction process of our country," said Laaha.

Sultan Maqsood Fazel of Christian Aid, which funds the center, said many of the students are aiming for university degrees in engineering, medicine, journalism or social sciences. In fact, in 2003, of the 1,500 students from Herat who entered university, 500 were women and 70 percent of the women were students from the center.

The Galaxy Women's Training Center hopes to open up more Galaxy Centers to advance women's social growth and development and help strengthen the role of women within Afghan society.

### 3. Building a Vibrant Afghan Women’s Civil Society

The U.S. government announced, in late 2004, two newly-created programs to strengthen and build the capacity of civil society in Afghanistan: the two-year, \$10 million Literacy and Community Empowerment Program (LCEP) and the three-year, \$15.6 million Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (I-PACS).

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including Afghan women’s organizations; develop a legal framework for how NGOs operate in the country; and create a strategy for sustaining Afghan civil society.

To advance long-term development and build a vibrant civil society, the new assistance programs are tapping into Afghan’s women civil society—local nongovernmental organizations and existing community groups—to achieve the goals and objectives of the programs.

LCEP and I-PACS represent a significant departure from the development approach previously taken by the U.S., in which little effort was made to support and build the capacity of Afghan women’s civil society. However, the programs appear to be in line with congressional priorities expounded in recently passed legislation. In January 2004, Congress passed an annual spending bill (P.L. 108-199) that called for at least \$5

LCEP seeks to bolster development in rural communities by empowering women and young people through training in literacy and life skills for income-generation, and to strengthen community groups called Community Development Councils (CDCs).

I-PACS aims to build the capacity and support the programmatic work of local civil society,

million “to support programs to address the needs of Afghan women through training and equipment to improve the capacity of women-led Afghan nongovernmental organizations and to support the activities of such organizations.”<sup>16</sup> Increased support for women’s civil society in the fiscal year 2005 spending bill evinces a continuing commitment to women’s civil society development. On December 8, 2004, President George W. Bush signed P.L.108-447, which includes a provision designating \$7.5 million “for small grants to support training and equipment to improve the capacity of women-led Afghan non-governmental organizations and to support the activities of such organizations.”

#### **Defining Afghan Women’s Civil Society**

This paper defines the term civil society as “associations that exist outside of the state or market which maintain a degree of autonomy and independence and have the potential to provide alternative views, policies and actions to those promoted by the state and market.”<sup>17</sup> Specifically, it focuses on *women’s* civil society, meaning associations or organizations in which Afghan women hold the majority of the organizations’ leadership positions and set the agenda and priorities. As women’s civil society organizations are defined by their staffing, not by their beneficiaries, they may serve men and boys as well as women and girls. Groups run by men that serve women do not fit the definition of women’s civil society for the purposes of this paper.

***In January 2004, Congress passed an annual spending bill (P.L. 108-199) that called for at least \$5 million “to support programs to address the needs of Afghan women through training and equipment to improve the capacity of women-led Afghan nongovernmental organizations and to support the activities of such organizations.”***

In Afghanistan, two types of organizations — non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community

groups — make up the majority of women’s civil society. As this paper understands the terms, development NGOs are nonprofit, formal groups with organizational structures that employ individuals to perform jobs and implement projects that further the development mission of the organization. NGOs in Afghanistan tend to operate on a national or regional level, often implementing multiple larger-scale projects such as literacy and health initiatives. NGOs also tend to have access to the government in Kabul and therefore are well positioned to advocate for national policies that benefit women.

The term “NGO” has taken on negative connotations in Afghanistan due to the absence of standardized regulations. Unconstrained by a legal definition, some for-profit groups that earn profits conducting

***In Afghanistan, two types of organizations — non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community groups — make up the majority of women’s civil society.***

reconstruction and humanitarian relief work label themselves NGOs. This has resulted in some confusion among the Afghan people, casting a dark shadow over the work of even the best organizations doing nonprofit humanitarian and development activities. This paper uses the term “NGO” to describe

organizations that are not-for-profit.

Community groups in Afghanistan focus primarily on improving their own communities, often by coming together as democratically-elected Community Development Councils (CDCs) that make decisions on behalf of their communities. While these councils can potentially take on an official governance role, thus blurring the line between civil society and government,



for now they meet the definition of civil society.<sup>18</sup> Community groups have also proven to be especially adept at building support for cultural change at the grassroots level. These groups are effective in influencing their communities because they know which members in their community share their views and which individuals are influential in creating change. Recently, some community groups have stepped up to the challenge of implementing small local development projects. Members of the community staff these groups, and while individual community members may be remunerated for their work, the groups as institutions do not benefit financially.

The NGOs and community groups fulfill complementary functions. Development projects have the greatest chance of success when grassroots leaders build support and acceptance among the programs’ beneficiaries. At the same time, grassroots efforts work best when supported by institutions that have the expertise to deliver promised results. Moreover, development programs, particularly those focusing on the rights of women, have the greatest impact on women and girls when supported by national, regional, and local policies that codify and promote gender rights. Therefore, advocacy at all levels of government is necessary, and women’s civil society groups specializing in each are worthwhile and useful. Due to their work on a national level, NGOs are skilled in national advocacy, while networks of local groups have a special role to play in advocating to local governing bodies.

The interdependence of Afghan NGOs and community groups will become even more defined in the future. As the description of LCEP indicates, community groups depend on NGOs for training and support. Assuming that international groups will eventually leave Afghanistan or considerably scale back their programs, it will be incumbent on Afghan civil society to provide these critical services.

In Afghanistan, women’s civil society is best served when women’s NGOs and community groups have the capacity and resources needed to accomplish their objectives. The new assistance programs proposed by the U.S. government — Literacy and Community Empowerment Program (LCEP) and Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (I-PACS) — potentially offer opportunities for both.

### **Background on women’s NGOs**

Afghanistan, like most post-conflict countries, has experienced a groundswell of NGO activity. While the

exact number of local women's NGOs is not known, a dynamic cadre of women leaders has spurred a visible community of women's NGOs. In Kabul alone, more than 60 organizations have come together under the aegis of the Afghan Women's Network (AWN), an eight-year-old coalition dedicated to connecting and building the capacity of women-led groups that promote Afghan women's rights.<sup>19</sup> Their collective effort is compounded by the work of smaller NGOs, as well as women's community groups that provide services at the provincial and local level. To date, no formal research has been published mapping their reach or cataloguing the impact of their work. However, several Kabul-based stakeholders, including the Foundation for Culture and Society and the National Center for Policy Research at Kabul University, have responded to anecdotal evidence of their influence by initiating a process to collect more data on Afghan women's NGOs.

The varied and complex causes of women's poverty in Afghanistan demand a broad, multisectoral approach. In the spring of 2004, Afghanistan-based members of the Policy Council on Afghan Women (PCAW), a coalition of women's organizations operating in Afghanistan and the U.S., generated a list of Afghan women's most urgent development needs. Basic healthcare, literacy and accelerated education, political and civic engagement training, and economic opportunity topped their list. Additionally, the coalition highlighted the importance of specific types of support including anti-domestic violence programs, mental health services, gender sensitization for the media and judicial officials, legal aid, and leadership training. As Malaly Volpi, executive director of the Policy Council on Afghan Women explained, women's NGOs will play a leading role in the implementation of these critical programs, given their access to remote parts of Afghanistan and their entrenched relationships with the women the programs will serve.<sup>20</sup> For now, they are mostly involved with basic education, rudimentary health, and income-generation skills programs.

After recognizing that mainstreaming women into public life would not automatically translate into policy action, several organizations have also put resources toward advocacy. Focusing on both national and international decision makers, women's groups won a number of highly visible victories. Institutionally, their work has resulted in the creation of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, as well as the incorporation of women's human rights into the new constitution. Their work has also made domestic violence, which was previously cloaked by shame and household privacy, an increasingly public issue.

## Box 2

### **Serving Our Sisters — Development Activities of W.O.M.A.N., an Afghan Women's Organization<sup>22</sup>**

Since 2002, W.O.M.A.N., an Afghan women's NGO, has been working closely with war widows to boost their literacy and to teach new job skills in tailoring for income generation. Prior to the program, most of the widows could barely afford to take care of their children; indeed, many were forced to send them to orphanages.

By the completion of the six-month course, women have learned basic skills in reading and writing, in addition to sewing. For the first time in their lives, many are able to read signs on the street and in the shops, as well as earn money to support their struggling families.

"I remember one lady told me after the first week that before she did not even know how to hold a pen - in her right hand or left hand - but now she knows," said Mina Sherzoy, President/Founder of W.O.M.A.N.

After certification, the women are introduced to microcredit organizations for small loans to start their businesses. "You will be amazed what these women have done with \$100," said Sherzoy.

The program has enabled widows to work from home and sell their crafts in the bazaar. Since W.O.M.A.N. is frequently approached by investors looking for good tailors, the program has helped the women gain a new clientele.

W.O.M.A.N. hopes to expand the program across several provinces in Afghanistan.

Women's NGOs have expressed interest in expanding their work to better meet the needs of their Afghan sisters. Most notably, they want to introduce women to their new role in Afghan society by teaching them about their rights, showing them how to use the law to defend themselves, encouraging them to participate politically, and building their leadership skills. Additionally, organizations would like to provide more sophisticated and advanced education, health, and economic empowerment services. While few organizations have assumed their potential role in the provision of less conventional services, enormous possibilities exist in the fields of agri-business training and sustainable small business development support.<sup>21</sup>

### **Background on Community Groups**

Afghan communities traditionally have had community councils called *shuras*. Historically, *shuras* were attended by men and focused on solving community problems and conflict resolution. Women largely were not involved in

*shuras*; however, they often collaborated with each other on an informal basis.

The nature of community groups began to change in 1995 when the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, UN Habitat, initiated a program to combat poverty and involve communities in the development process with the creation of new community groups called Community Fora or Community Development Councils (CDCs). These councils consist of a group of female and male community members who are elected by the community to make decisions about how the community can best use available resources to meet its development needs. With funding from UN Habitat<sup>23</sup> and later an internationally financed program, most CDCs have received training and have been able to choose, implement, manage, and monitor at least one development priority for their community. To promote transparency and full participation, CDCs organize regular meetings with the broader community to report on their activities and finances and discuss community concerns. Some have established community centers,



often built and funded by members of the community, where they can conduct meetings and programs.

By 2002, following the overthrow of the Taliban, 80 CDCs were operating in Kabul, Mazar-e-Sharif, Bamyan, Herat, Kandahar, Panjshir, and Farah.<sup>24</sup> In Mazar-e-Sharif alone, the CDCs provided general and vocational education to an estimated 10,840 people a year, initiated a self-funding solid waste collection system, operated 10 self-sustaining clinics, and created income-generating opportunities for over 1,500 individuals working in their homes.<sup>25</sup>

Recognizing the impact of the CDCs, Afghan President Hamid Karzai recommended that donors work with the Afghan government to implement a similar program on a much larger scale. The World Bank seized on the initiative and agreed to fund the government's National Solidarity Program (NSP), a program that aims to promote development throughout Afghanistan by strengthening communities. The \$600 million program has expanded the number of CDCs to some 7,680, which are located in all of the country's 32 provinces.<sup>26</sup> By 2007, the program will scale up to work in some 20,000 communities.<sup>27</sup> The Afghan Ministry of Rural Reconstruction and Development (MRRD) and a team of 22 international NGOs manage the NSP. The Afghan government does not influence the decisions of the CDCs, according to accounts of the program.<sup>28</sup>

The CDCs are not exclusively women-led, but women have participated actively and have begun to reap the rewards. The public process of electing CDC representatives by secret ballot has reinforced women's rights as citizens. All women and men over the age of 18 have the right to vote and run for representative seats,<sup>29</sup> and women have participated as both candidates and voters. As of December 2003, women comprised nearly 40 percent of actual voters. More impressively, more than 75 percent of women who were eligible to vote did, compared to 68 percent of eligible men.<sup>30</sup> Their participation as voters resulted in the election of 2,289 women in 352 villages.<sup>31</sup> In some communities, women and men engage in joint CDC activities. Where necessary, CDCs have accommodated cultural demands by allowing women and men CDC members to meet separately and devise creative ways for the two groups to reach consensus.

## 4. Assessment of the Needs of Women’s Civil Society

**W**omen’s civil society is only as strong as its component parts – namely, the organizations that make up this sector. For local organizations to be effective, they need financial stability, skilled staff, internal organization, and a place to conduct their work. If possible, it is beneficial for these groups to

*For local organizations to be effective, they need financial stability, skilled staff, internal organization, and a place to conduct their work.*

have a mechanism for coordination to ensure that each organization’s work complements other organizations’ work rather than crowding some fields with the same services, and failing to fulfill the needs of their beneficiaries in other areas.

Once organizations are well-organized, staffed with the appropriate expertise, and sufficiently funded, certain conditions need to be in place for women’s civil society to fulfill its role optimally:

### **Autonomy and independence from the government.**

Autonomy is best achieved when the government is committed to enforcing well-developed laws that codify the independence of civil society. A legal firewall gives groups the space they need to make decisions without the fear of retaliation by the government. At the same time, groups work best when they have access to government officials for advocacy efforts. For this to happen, an established government system is necessary, so women’s civil society groups can reliably predict how governance decisions will be made and by whom.

### **Increased access to information.**

Women’s civil society groups need to be informed about national and international events and decisions, in addition to being able to share their own knowledge and opinions with the public. Free, uncensored, and independent media that are available in a medium accessible to all Afghans will help facilitate this process. In a country like Afghanistan where illiteracy rates are high, print media may not be a viable way to

communicate with the public; other forms of communication may offer more appropriate options.

### **Community support and volunteerism.**

The sustainability of women’s civil society depends on the availability of qualified women who support and want to contribute to the civil society sector. A culture of volunteerism and social responsibility inspires individuals to become engaged in civil society.

The next sections of this paper will look primarily at the U.S. government’s previous efforts to build the individual institutions that comprise civil society. It will then briefly address the more global needs of the sector as a whole.



## 5. U.S. Government Contribution to Afghan Women's Civil Society

Several US government agencies are responsible for reconstruction and development activities in Afghanistan. For the most part, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has shouldered the challenge of providing humanitarian relief to the Afghan people immediately following the fall of the Taliban in 2001. USAID also takes primary responsibility for the economic, political, and social development of the country. Their work is complemented by highly specialized initiatives operating out of the U.S. Department of State. The State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), for example, has oversight over refugee and repatriation services. Similarly, the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council, a special Department of State initiative, focuses on promoting public-private partnerships between U.S. and Afghan institutions and mobilizing private sector resources to assist Afghan women.

Since 2002, the U.S. Congress has appropriated almost \$4.2 billion in assistance to Afghanistan.<sup>32</sup> Of this, \$189 million has been specifically designated for Afghan women.<sup>33</sup> To date, only \$3.8 million in USAID grants has reached Afghan women's civil society groups.<sup>34</sup>

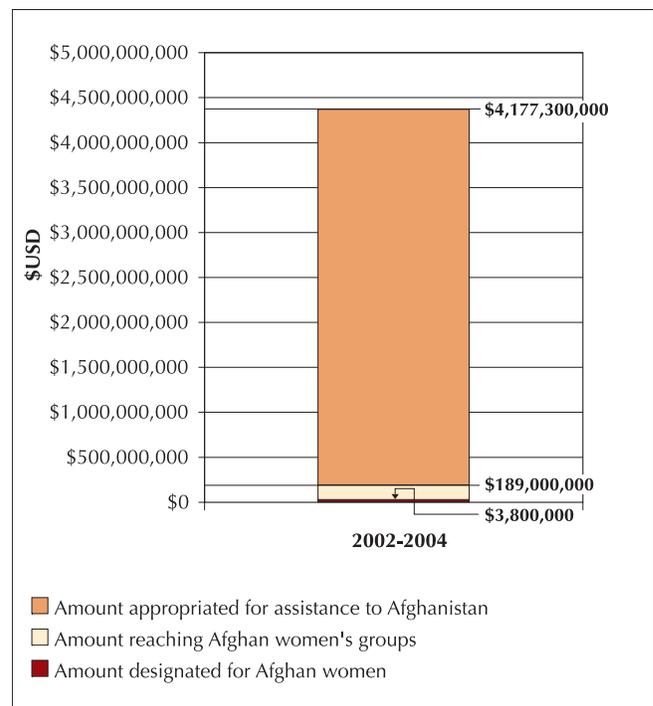
The lackluster U.S. support for Afghan women's civil society is particularly evident when contrasted to the total amount granted to the Afghan civil society sector.

***The lackluster U.S. support for Afghan women's civil society is particularly evident when contrasted to the total amount granted to the Afghan civil society sector.***

Between the fall of 2002 and the summer of 2004, almost \$75 million in USAID grants were devoted to Afghan civil society groups. Afghan women's civil society groups have received \$3.8 million, just 5 percent of the total.<sup>35</sup>

Of this amount, \$3.7 million or 96 percent went to the Afghan Women's Education Center (AWEC), leaving \$142,042, which was dispersed to more than ten groups.<sup>36</sup>

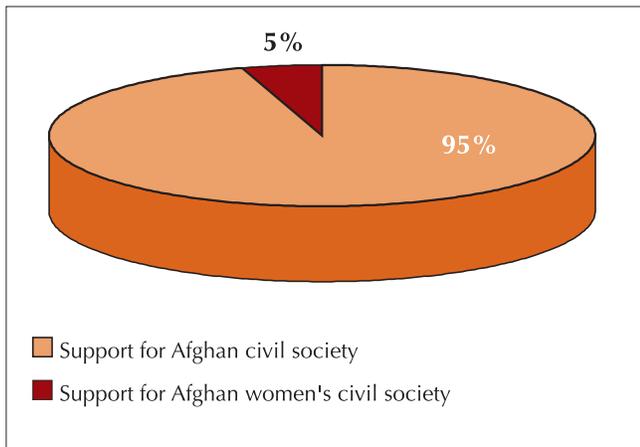
**Figure 1. U.S. Support for Afghan Women and Afghan Women's Civil Society in Comparison to Total Assistance to Afghanistan**



This amount was supplemented by additional support from the Department of State, but the exact amount is not known. Since September 2001, the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration has obligated almost \$290 million for assistance and protection programs for Afghan refugees and returnees. Many of the beneficiaries of these activities are women and children.<sup>37</sup> While the PRM officials are confident that some funds have reached Afghan women's civil society groups, they have not tracked the total amount and therefore cannot estimate the extent of their support.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, the exact amount of funding from the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council is unclear. In 2003, the Council collaborated with the Department of State's Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA) to implement a one-time \$750,000 exchange program that was financed by the U.S. Government. According to the

**Figure 2. U.S. Support for Afghan Women’s Civil Society as a Percentage of Total U.S. Support for Afghan Civil Society**



Request for Applications (RFA), only U.S. NGOs were eligible to receive funds, and they were required to partner with Afghan women’s civil society groups. According to the ECA, a percentage of the grants were supposed to be directed to Afghan women’s groups. However, ECA claimed not to have the authority to release data about the allocation of resources between the U.S. and Afghan women’s civil society groups, contending that the provision of information would violate the intellectual property rights of its grantees.<sup>39</sup>

While the programs supported by the ECA/U.S.-Afghan Women’s Council sought to benefit women in Afghanistan, some Afghan women’s civil society groups reported dissatisfaction with how the program was structured and implemented. Many women’s groups asserted that they had no knowledge about the program and therefore could not approach U.S. development organizations to recommend projects and partnerships. Others criticized the RFAs’ strong emphasis on cost sharing, stating that the requirement was prohibitive, and consequently assumed that they could not participate.<sup>40</sup>

### USAID Funding Not Reaching Women’s Civil Society Organizations

The limited focus on women’s civil society reflects a strategic decision made by the U.S. when it began reconstruction work in the fall of 2001. Confronted by the severity of Afghanistan’s poverty, the U.S. focused on assessing the most urgent needs of the Afghan people and putting systems in place to respond with appropriate services as rapidly as possible. Early investigations into the status of Afghan women illuminated the crippling

impact of the lack of access to basic health and education services. At that time, in Taliban-controlled areas, up to 69 percent of Afghan women had reported restrictions on receiving adequate medical care, including maternal health, which resulted in Afghanistan’s high maternal mortality rate.<sup>41</sup> And due to the Taliban regime’s ban on education for girls over the age of 12, in 2000, 97 percent of girls were not enrolled in school.<sup>42</sup>

*In an attempt to hasten delivery, women’s projects were rolled into USAID’s overall efforts in the health and education sectors... The development of women’s civil society took a backburner under the emergency-oriented strategy.*

In an attempt to hasten delivery, women’s projects were rolled into USAID’s overall efforts in the health and education sectors, which were contracted to major for-profit contractors and American and other international NGOs. The development of women’s civil society took a backburner under the emergency-oriented

#### Box 3

##### USAID’s Difficulty in Working with Women’s Civil Society Organizations<sup>45</sup>

The shortage of US international assistance to Afghan women’s civil society groups is best understood within the context of the constraints faced by USAID:

- **Accountability to Congress.** USAID spends U.S. taxpayers’ money, and as a result, Congress requires the agency to maintain strict accounting procedures. These requirements, in turn, are transferred to the organizations and contractors that work with USAID. The result is a complex set of regulations that require recipient organizations to prove their financial viability and programmatic impact. Few Afghan women’s civil society groups have the infrastructure and capacity to meet these requirements.
- **Staffing.** Managing a small grant takes as much time as a large grant. The USAID Mission in Afghanistan has operated with a skeleton staff for the last three years. Given their labor constraints, they have tried to work with groups that can manage larger projects. Afghan women’s civil society groups tend to operate smaller projects, and therefore cannot offer USAID the preferred scope of work.

strategy. Although contractors were encouraged to work with local groups, USAID did not evaluate whether or not they partnered with local groups.

A notable exception was a small grants project contracted to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), a major for-profit development firm responsible for several USAID-funded projects in Afghanistan. The project was intended to make small grants available to organizations operating small-scale projects targeted to women<sup>43</sup> and would have been an ideal mechanism for dispersing funds to local women's civil society groups. However, only 4.3 percent of the grants reached local Afghan women's groups. Between November 2003 and March 2004, IOM parceled out nearly \$600,000 to nine organizations. Only two grants went to Afghan women's civil society groups. One group received \$2,580 and the other \$23,280.<sup>44</sup>

### **Call for US Government to Track Funds to Women's Civil Society Organizations**

In gathering information from USAID and the Department of State, it became clear that neither agency has consistently tracked the amount of financial support

reaching local women's civil society groups. With the exception of the Office of Transition Initiatives, one of several USAID offices working in Afghanistan, neither USAID nor the Department of State has maintained an accurate track of how grantees sub-contract to local Afghan groups.

In response to the Women's Edge Coalition's request for information, USAID officials promptly reached out to contractors and gathered information about their subcontracts. Although the tracking process would not have been done unless specifically requested, their success illustrates that compiling this information is possible. Given the importance of supporting women's civil society in Afghanistan, USAID and involved offices at the Department of State should begin to consistently track how much support is devoted to women's organizations. Without this data, measuring how much emphasis is placed on building women's civil society is exceedingly difficult, and perceived inattention can be interpreted as indifference. If supporting local women's civil society groups is a goal of the U.S. government, efforts should be extended to create a tracking system.

#### **Box 4**

### **Empowering Afghan Refugee Women and Girls Through Human Rights Training<sup>46</sup>**

Many Afghan refugees, living for years in impoverished camps in Pakistan, worry about what the future holds. Some even worry if international relief organizations delivering humanitarian assistance in the camps are working to promote "foreign" values. In such a tense setting, discussions on women's rights can lead to heated debates — and sometimes violence.

The Afghan Institute of Learning (AIL), an Afghan organization run by Afghan women, has stepped in to offer human rights workshops to refugee women in Peshawar, Pakistan. Teaching human rights education to Afghan women is highly controversial, but AIL provides a safe and secure environment for Afghan refugee women to learn more about their rights in culturally sensitive training workshops.

Deeply rooted in Islamic principles and respectful of Afghan culture, the workshops teach about rights and leadership, which are also outlined in international women's rights documents. Indeed, AIL leaders see the workshops as the first step in advancing the rights of women in Afghanistan.

While human rights education is the core of AIL, its programs have expanded to offer preschool through post-secondary education for women and children, health education, peace education, enrichment classes, and income-generating skill training.

"I started in a literacy class and now I am able to read and write as a student in grade six or eight," said one student in a fast-track education class. "Besides, we feel very safe in this center."

AIL now serves over 350,000 Afghan women and children each year in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

## 6. New U.S. Assistance Programs to Strengthen Afghan Civil Society

The Literacy and Community Empowerment Program (LCEP) and the Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (I-PACS) form the cornerstones of the new U.S. effort to build the capacity of Afghan women's civil society. This section seeks to forecast their combined impact by measuring the plans for each program against the specific needs of Afghan civil society organizations – Community Development Councils and Afghan women's NGOs — that will be the primary beneficiaries of the new assistance programs. To facilitate the comparison, the section provides information on the needs of different types of women's civil society groups. While this method illuminates the potential of the plans, it is an extrapolation. **Because so much is contingent upon project implementation, formal evaluations will be necessary to determine the ultimate impacts of the projects.**

### Literacy and Community Empowerment Program (LCEP)<sup>47</sup>

In August 2004, USAID released a program description of the Literacy and Community Empowerment Program (LCEP).<sup>48</sup> Funded at \$10 million over two years (or \$5 million a year), LCEP is a pilot program, which USAID envisions expanding to more communities after the initial two-year phase. LCEP has two primary goals:

- ▼ Empower women and young people through increased literacy and skills for income generation.
- ▼ Strengthen Community Development Councils.



The community groups or Community Development Councils (CDCs) will be the primary mechanism for implementing LCEP's program activities, and in the process are expected to benefit from the training that accompanies the delivery of services. The program will work in 200 communities with existing CDCs that are open to initiating literacy programs and executing the program objectives.

### Category 1 – Literacy activities

LCEP creates the infrastructure for a rural literacy program by establishing a Kabul-based Women's Teacher Training Institute to implement a "train the trainers" model. Master Trainers will be taught state-of-the-art rural education practices and techniques for training Provincial Literacy Trainers (PLT). Master Trainers will then train the PLTs who, in turn, will train Village Literacy Teachers (VLT). The Village Literacy Teachers, who will be selected by the communities, will be responsible for teaching reading and math skills in their own communities. They will have access to PLTs, who will help them continue building their skills. Each village will have at least one female VLT; male VLTs will be trained as well. Some 65 percent of the students educated by the VLTs are required to be women or girls. Where possible, existing Afghan women's civil society groups working on literacy training will be given the opportunity to attend the Training Institute and act as Master Trainers and Provincial Literacy Trainers.

Through LCEP, USAID seeks to actively engage and strengthen Community Development Councils using the literacy training process. In addition to helping select VLTs, the CDCs will also be responsible for persuading their communities to permit women to learn to read. To facilitate this, LCEP will help CDCs establish Community Education Committees and will help these new committees develop advocacy skills to succeed in organizing grassroots support.

Additionally, CDCs and Education Committees will be responsible for setting the learning schedule and monitoring literacy programs, as well as finding creative ways to enable students to demonstrate their skills at community meetings. The LCEP will support their work

## Assessment of the Needs of Community Groups

Since women have the potential to hold leadership roles in CDCs, the groups are often viewed as a legitimate form of women's civil society. To maximize women's potential contribution, targeted support needs to be available to address four key obstacles:

- Insufficient funding in the short term for projects that women prioritize.
- Societal attitudes toward women's participation in community decisions.
- Women's underdeveloped leadership skills and lack of confidence.
- Insufficient networking between CDCs.

### Insufficient funding in the short term for projects that women prioritize.

Today, the National Solidarity Program is the primary source of support for the CDCs. Through this program, communities have access to a first-time block grant of up to \$60,000 to support a development project of their choice. Smaller follow-up grants are also available.<sup>49</sup> CDCs, with support from the National Solidarity Program, construct shelters, improve access roads, remove solid waste, and improve water supply.<sup>50</sup> Few programs focusing specifically on women have been funded, despite the fact that once women begin to work together through the CDCs, they tend to immediately establish programs, such as literacy classes, without external funding.<sup>51</sup> With more access to funding and technical assistance, women would be able to implement their classes more effectively by having the ability to use more up-to-date teaching techniques and to purchase materials like study guides, pens, and paper. Therefore, in the short term, a reliable source of targeted funding for women's development priorities is critical.

**Societal attitudes toward women's participation in community decisions.** Gender equality in voting and decision-making processes is new for most communities with CDCs. Each election is a step forward, but a long history and well-entrenched social norms have to be overcome. For example, some men still resist women's full and equal participation in the CDCs, even when women have been elected to positions of leadership. Therefore, external support is important in sustaining CDCs and the election process in their infancy while transformational practices sensitize communities to women's equity.

**Women's underdeveloped leadership skills and lack of confidence.** Due to women's low status in society and years of oppression, some women feel unqualified to take on leadership roles. More outreach and training to women and men is needed, so women can gain the skills necessary to participate and men will feel more comfortable with women taking on leadership and decision-making roles. The NSP trains men and women in financial management, procurement, technical skills, and transparency.<sup>52</sup> However, without a specific gender strategy, the program has failed to fulfill the needs of Afghan women.<sup>53</sup> Specifically, women need more individualized training to feel qualified to fully participate in leadership positions. Additional training should be available to all community members to promote receptivity to women's potential contributions.

**Insufficient networking between CDCs.** As the Afghan government takes clearer shape, CDCs should have access to local governance bodies as well as the skills for effective advocacy so they can push the government to be more responsive to their needs. To best accomplish this, linkages between different villages with CDCs will need to be established.<sup>54</sup>

around these activities by providing additional training, thus building the capacity of the CDCs and the individuals who participate in them.

Further, up to 75 engaged CDCs will have access to financial support to build community centers for literacy programs and other activities. The centers will be designed as places for all community members, and especially women, to meet and engage in group activities. The 75 eligible CDCs will be chosen based upon the distance of their communities from the nearest school, the village's literacy level, the community's desire for literacy, and the expected time until an accessible school is likely to be built.

This component of LCEP has been contracted to the Education Development Center, a U.S. NGO based in Newton, MA.

### Category 2 – Income generation skills and opportunities

The plans for this part of the program are less developed in the program description. According to USAID, LCEP will jumpstart economic activity in communities by helping to start up and grow new and existing enterprises. The program seeks to reach this goal in two ways: by creating a demand for labor, and creating a workforce with the skills needed to fill that demand. Start-up grants and possible small-loan programs will be available to support new income-generating opportunities. Additionally, men and women will be trained in business skills such as value-added production, accessing markets, buying and selling products, and targeting and making saleable items. The program aims to increase the income-earning potential of 3,250 women and 1,750 men.

While the plans for engaging CDCs are broad, the program description outlines a clear advocacy and grassroots-support-building role for the CDCs. Presumably,

*Like all development programs, LCEP's success will depend on how well it is implemented... Nevertheless, the proposed plans are promising because they offer solutions to many critical needs.*

the proposed plans are promising because they offer solutions to many critical needs. LCEP channels half of its funding into literacy education — the type of program most frequently prioritized by women who participate in CDCs. While targeted funding represents a stopgap solution to the larger dilemma of women's control over community resources, it offers a temporary answer that provides communities with time to become accustomed to women's equity and participation.

The likelihood of communities embracing women's priorities in the future is largely a question of reconditioning men and women to new gender norms — a process that demands time and effort. By following on the heels of the NSP, LCEP expands the window in which transformational practices can embed themselves into community life. Assuming that LCEP pairs its financial support with high-quality skills training, communities may gradually overcome their resistance to women's participation. The trainings can instill local capacity to run elections and a commitment to the inclusion of women in the operation of CDCs.



the support and training described in the subsection on the program's literacy activities will increase the CDCs' ability to carry out these tasks.

### **Analysis of LCEP**

Like all development programs, LCEP's success will depend on how well it is implemented, and for that reason, it is impossible to guarantee results prior to its rollout. Nevertheless,

While the benefits of women's empowerment are clear, Afghanistan's long history of occupation by foreign powers has led to a resistance by some communities to engage in "outside" efforts to improve women's status. LCEP is poised to overcome potential opposition to change by engaging first with the local community leadership, promoting services through the CDCs, and ensuring that both men and women benefit from available services. The conscious pairing of cultural change and the delivery of valuable services bodes well for the program's success.

Similarly, the program design takes steps to ensure that literacy training has immediate value to communities that implement it. Afghans are more likely to take advantage of educational opportunities when they clearly see that it will help them meet their basic needs in the long term. By coupling education and income generation, LCEP seeks to provide communities with an incentive to implement an educational program, which is critical due to the program's strong emphasis on gender.

At the same time, LCEP is not a silver bullet. Its impact on women's leadership skills is difficult to assess because the program description does not provide details about the types of training it plans to offer, nor does it outline specific targets for how many men and women will be trained. The fact that a training component is part of the proposal is promising, but with respect to building women's capacity, its impact will be determined by the implementation.

Even if it successfully empowers women and strengthens CDCs, the program's proposal does not outline how it will prepare community groups to fulfill their core function as regional advocates. While LCEP teaches women to advocate for their needs at the local level and encourages participation in national elections, the program does not prepare women to influence the regional or national government. To promote regional advocacy, a program needs to be developed that networks existing CDCs and helps them learn and apply the skills necessary to advocate on a regional level.

### **The Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (I-PACS)**

The Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (I-PACS) is similar to LCEP in that it aims to build the capacity and support the programmatic work of women's civil society. However, as proposed, this initiative is markedly different from LCEP in four important ways. First, I-PACS finances the development of a strategic plan for strengthening civil society in Afghanistan. Second, the

**According to the plans for the program, I-PACS has the potential to succeed because it will provide training while supporting the ongoing work of existing women's civil society groups. Its challenge lies in learning from the experiences of local NGOs, identifying specific needs, and committing to overcoming these challenges**

women's NGOs, this section will analyze whether it fits their organizational and capacity-building needs. The next section of the paper will examine how the program impacts the autonomy and free flow of information to women's NGOs.

### **Details on the I-PACS program**

In October 2004, USAID released a Request for Applications (RFA) outlining the goals and parameters of I-PACS, a \$15.6 million program that will roll out over three years. Slated to begin operating in January 2005, IPACS aims to:

- ▼ Support the work and build the capacity of existing civil society groups.
- ▼ Promote NGO registration.
- ▼ Create a strategy for future civil society development.

The project actively targets women beneficiaries by requiring that at least half of the funds support women-focused organizations that promote the development of women.

#### **Category 1 – Support the work and build the capacity of existing civil society groups**

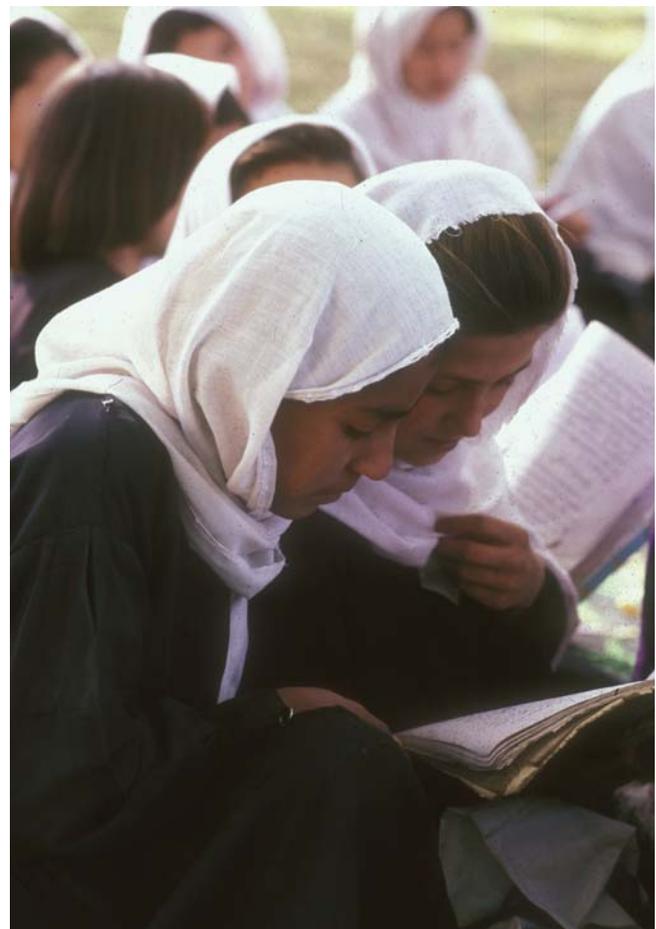
An NGO with proven expertise in civil society development will administer the integrated capacity-building and grant-making functions that constitute the centerpiece of I-PACS. The project will begin with broad outreach to existing Afghan civil society groups. After

program helps civil society advocate for the passage of comprehensive legislation that will provide a legal framework for how NGOs will operate in the country. Third, the initiative's support for projects is not limited to literacy and economic opportunity and can thus finance efforts such as advocacy, domestic violence, and women's health programs. Finally, it makes capacity-building services and programmatic support available to community groups and NGOs.

Since I-PACS is the primary tool for the U.S. government to meet the needs of Afghan

determining the needs of each group and establishing baseline data for assessing future progress, the organization implementing I-PACS will work with each recipient organization to tailor a training program to meet the group's unique needs. Available trainings will address all aspects of transparent service delivery including finance and accounting, management, organizational governance, public outreach, sustainability, networking, service delivery, and advocacy.

Participation in the training program will give Afghan civil society groups access to the small grants component of I-PACS. The assistance program will provide a minimum of \$5 million in small grants of up to \$100,000 for each organization. The program will also fund the development and advocacy activities of local groups so they can better achieve their self-determined objectives. The fund will be advertised in the Afghan press, and proposals will be accepted on a rolling basis once criteria for awarding of grants are established. Technical assistance in organizational development, strategic planning, and proposal writing will be available on an "as-needed" basis to assist organizations with the application process.



## Category 2 – Promote NGO registration

I-PACS will complement its central grant-making and capacity-building activities with a concerted effort to promote the passage and implementation of the widely heralded NGO law that has been temporarily stalled in

the wake of the October presidential elections. The product of a two-year collaboration between the Afghan government and the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law, the new law will standardize the financial and governance practices of local groups, rendering Afghan

### Box 6

#### Assessment of the Needs of Women's NGOs<sup>55</sup>

Women's NGOs operate in a very challenging environment. In addition to serious security risks throughout the country, the severe shortage of skilled Afghan staff has resulted in a small pool of qualified Afghans to take on management-level jobs. In fact, some estimate that number to be as low as 35,000. As a result, women's NGOs must compete for qualified Afghan staff with the better-funded and more established international organizations and contractors offering higher salaries. As a result, the cost of labor has spiraled upwards, placing an extreme burden on all local civil society groups.

Within this context, women's NGOs face three particular challenges:

- Insufficient funding.
- A need for individual capacity building.
- A need for training and technical assistance.

#### Insufficient funding.

A small operating budget limits women's NGOs' programmatic work. Lacking sufficient support, many have had trouble covering the costs of traveling to communities in need and acquiring the materials to work as effectively as possible. Budget constraints also limit their ability to compete with international organizations offering lucrative salaries to the most qualified workers. Instead, they have to hire and train less-skilled labor. These deficiencies limit the work and impact of even the most sophisticated women's groups, many of which are led by highly educated Afghan women who have repatriated after decades in the developed world.

#### A need for individual capacity-building.

After years of isolation from public life, few Afghan women aid workers feel fully equipped to stand up to the prevailing attitude of superiority apparent among their male peers and colleagues. Their individual effectiveness would increase exponentially with access to organized support systems designed to strengthen women's confidence in their own ideas and abilities. Similarly, refresher courses in basic communications skills would provide women with the tools they need to effectively convey and defend their ideas.

#### A need for training and technical assistance.

Institutional capacity must be built to unleash the full potential of local women's organizations and to begin to develop norms of accountability and transparency. Individual groups have unique needs, but overall, NGOs need to update five broad categories of expertise:

- **Sectoral knowledge** – Many women's NGOs successfully provide basic services, but few have been privy to the most up-to-date methodologies and resources. Advanced training in the technical aspects of their work would magnify the impact of their projects.
- **Finance and accounting** – Donors often demand that recipient groups use Western finance and accounting systems. Local women's lack of familiarity with the requirements stalls potentially productive relationships.
- **Management** – Training organizational leadership in management, recruitment, staff appraisal, strategic planning, and time management would empower NGOs to increase their efficiency and allocate available resources more effectively.
- **Coalition building** – Resource shortages have cultivated a culture of individualism in Afghanistan that has impacted the way organizations collaborate. Efforts need to be made to increase the institutional will and ability to actively cooperate with other organizations.
- **Interacting with donor country representatives** – Without experience in required grant writing, reporting, and monitoring and evaluation procedures, fully operational women's NGOs are not able to communicate their value to donors. Improving institutional capacity in these areas would give organizations the chance to access the funding needed for transportation, materials, and staffing.

Meeting the training needs of women's organizations will require an increased investment from the international donor community. Again, programmatic and capacity-building support must be delivered simultaneously, as these resources sustain women's NGOs as they develop their institutional capacity.

civil society a safer investment target for donors. To mobilize further support for the sector, several Afghan NGOs are advocating quick passage of the bill. I-PACS will support their efforts and, upon passage, assist involved government ministries with its implementation. Additionally, I-PACS will promote compliance by helping small grants recipients meet all legal registration, reporting, tax provision, and membership requirements.

### **Category 3 - Create a strategy for future civil society development**

Finally, recognizing the relative absence of timely data and up-to-date analytical work on civil society in Afghanistan, I-PACS will commission an in-depth assessment of the sector as a whole. The conclusion from the assessment will provide a context for understanding and responding to organizations' needs; baseline data against which future progress will be measured; and the backbone of a long-term strategy for nurturing Afghanistan's civil society.

### **Analysis of I-PACS**

The implementation of I-PACS will be extremely important in advancing the progress of Afghan women. According to the plans for the program, I-PACS has the

potential to succeed because it will provide training *while* supporting the ongoing work of existing women's civil society groups. Its challenge lies in learning from the experiences of local NGOs, identifying specific needs, and committing to overcoming these challenges (See *Major Challenges Faced by Afghan Women's NGOs and Potential Solutions*). If I-PACS is accessible and responds to their needs, the program has the potential to build the capacity of women's civil society organizations.

In addition, I-PACS may attract additional support for women's NGOs if the NGO law advocacy aspect of the program succeeds in giving the NGO sector more legitimacy. A major obstacle to international support for Afghan women's civil society has been the lack of standards ensuring the transparency and accountability of local NGOs. Without credible standards for all NGOs, donors have chosen to either create specialized programs to evaluate individual NGOs or avoid working with local NGOs altogether. Once implemented, the new NGO law can help facilitate direct funding for local groups, as the Afghan government will only register organizations that meet the codified standard. This change may translate into increased support for local women's NGOs.



## Box 7

### Major Challenges Faced by Afghan Women's NGOs and Potential Solutions

I-PACs will have the best chance of success if it integrates the lessons learned from past efforts to support local women's NGOs. This text box highlights some of the major challenges that Afghan women's NGOs have faced and offers solutions to resolving the situation, including suggestions on the development of a small grants fund.

**Challenge:** In the past, Afghan women's NGOs believed funding for projects was only available for certain sectors. To stay afloat, groups would apply for grants for development work that was outside of their mission and in areas where they did not have expertise. Thus, funders, rather than the demand for specific services, drove programmatic and strategic planning decisions.

**Solution:** By accepting and funding proposals in all sectors, a small grants fund could encourage NGOs to be visionaries, not just implementers. Thus the fund should not solicit proposals for specific work.

**Challenge:** Afghan women's NGOs report that often they were not aware of funding opportunities, and when they have been, many did not know how to start the process of applying for support.

**Solution:** Proposals for small grants can be solicited widely using the mass media, including radio, email, and other forms of written solicitation to advertise the fund. Ensuring that all written information and instructions are translated into Afghan languages including Dari and other region-specific languages will make them accessible. Additionally, identifying and providing contact information for the individual responsible for liaising with Afghan civil society groups could help women's NGOs learn about and participate in the grant process.

**Challenge:** Governance and administration (G&A) costs have become prohibitive for women's NGOs. In addition to needing support for their programmatic activities, women's NGOs also need funding for staff, rent, furniture, etc. Given these circumstances, cost-sharing requirements have been viewed as prohibitive and have caused women's NGOs not to apply for funding in the past.

**Solution:** Allowing small grants applicants to include a general support component in their proposals can help groups afford daily operating costs and begin to invest in their own capacity. Also, a fund can attract applicants by avoiding cost sharing (i.e. fully funding an entire project instead of providing a percentage of the funds and expecting the group to identify remaining funds elsewhere). Full funding for projects would particularly speak to the needs of those groups that are still building their fundraising capacity.

**Challenge:** Women's NGOs do not collect the data that donors need to monitor and evaluate their work. Often, groups do not know how to collect the specific statistics that are demanded and need to develop the necessary skills. However, important anecdotal data is collected, including details on how well their programs are working.

**Solution:** In the short term, developing flexible and credible evaluating and reporting mechanisms that capitalize on the types of data that women's NGOs already collect, could promote accountability while giving groups time to develop conventional reporting capacities.

**Challenge:** Training programs are often designed to build the capacity of an individual leader rather than an institution as a whole. If the leader leaves the organization, the group loses its skills training and knowledge.

**Solution:** Inviting multiple individuals within an NGO to participate in trainings helps institutionalize new knowledge and protects that group against the loss of key staff.

**Challenge:** Available grants are often very short-term, sometimes for as little as three months. This does not allow sufficient time for planning and meaningful implementation. This short timeframe is especially dangerous because poorly planned programs fail to deliver promised results, thus damaging the trust of the leaders whose buy-in is important to women's development.

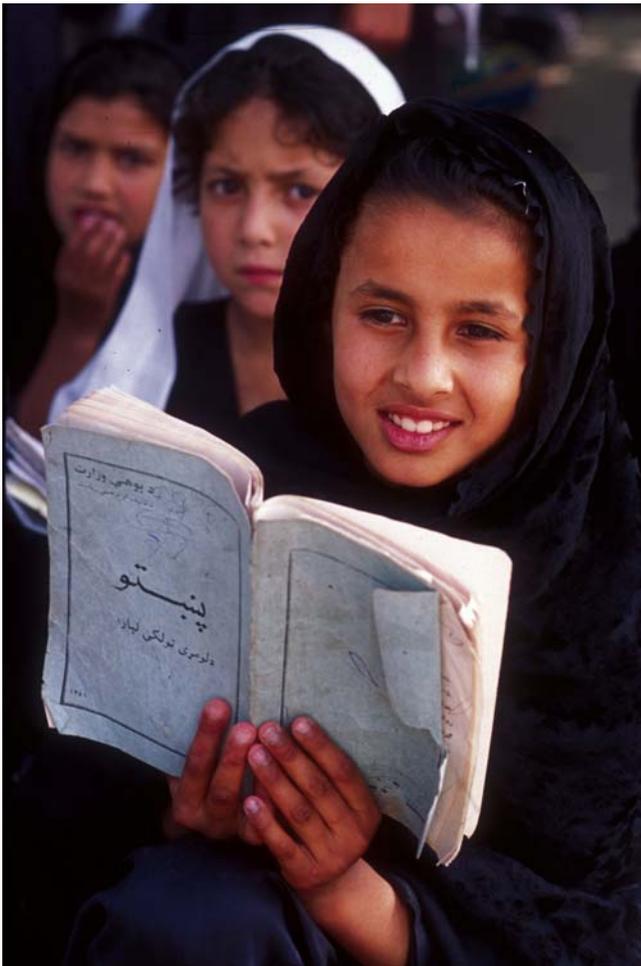
**Solution:** Lengthening the funding cycle to at least one year and providing sufficient resources to cover salaries during the project planning process will give groups the time and resources they need to implement effective programs.

## 7. Forecasting USAID's Plans for Afghan Women's Civil Society

As discussed in Section 4, women's civil society organizations work best when key conditions are met. This section briefly discusses how the combination of LCEP and I-PACS may affect the other criteria, namely: coordination, autonomy and legal framework, free press, and cultural appreciation for the role of civil society. A complete study should be undertaken to assess how other U.S. assistance programs influence each of these categories.

### Coordination

As they are currently described, LCEP and I-PACS do not create an infrastructure for a sustainable, locally owned mechanism for groups to network, collaborate, and cooperate to prevent overlapping with each other's work.



### Autonomy and legal framework

I-PACS will help facilitate the passage of a proposed NGO law, and has the potential to promote a clear and positive relationship between the government and Afghan civil society, including Afghan women's civil society. Depending upon how the law is written, it can accomplish two things: define the meaning of an NGO and determine the appropriate relationship between the government and civil society. The new assistance programs do not deal with other aspects of autonomy, including the development of a stable governmental system.

### Free press

According to the available descriptions of I-PACS and LCEP, the programs will work with the media but will not undertake media development activities.

### Cultural appreciation for the role civil society

LCEP aims to encourage Afghans to value and respect the role of civil society and encourages their participation.

## 8. Conclusion

After decades of living under the Taliban's oppressive regime, women's civil society has an important role to play in providing Afghan women with essential services to bolster their health, well-being, and income. Because Afghan women's civil society is the group of service providers with a permanent and sustainable interest in helping Afghan women, this sector must continue to develop the capacity to deliver these critical services. Given the U.S.'s pledge to improve the lives of Afghan women and the country's development, the U.S. should invest in the development of local civil society.

The women of Afghanistan are primarily served by two types of women's civil society groups: women's

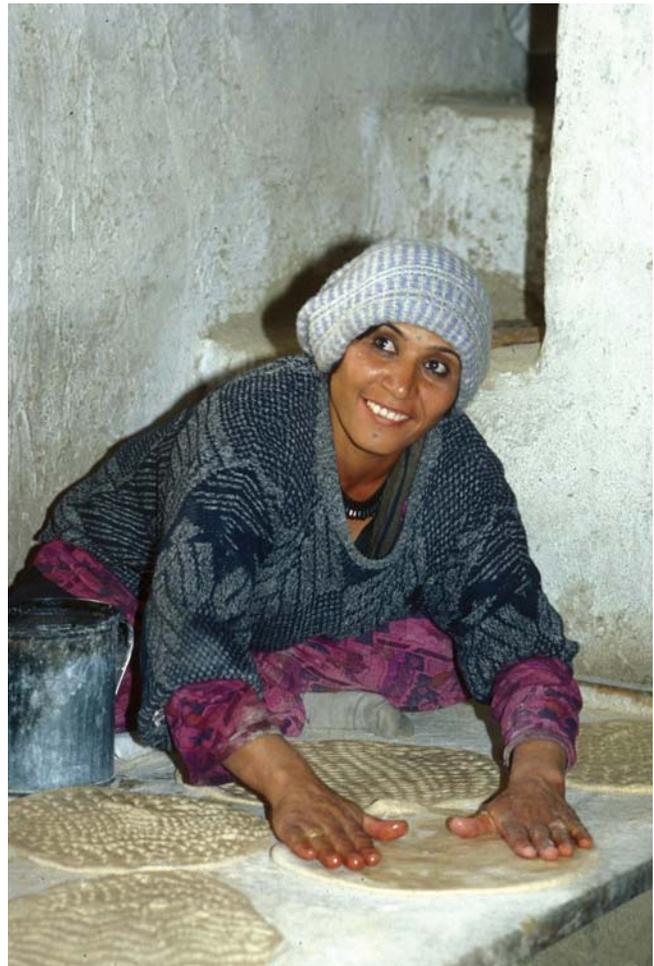
***The plans for LCEP and I-PACS provide solutions to many of the well-recognized challenges faced by women's civil society groups... The U.S. should nurture their potential by generously funding, actively monitoring, and consistently troubleshooting both programs.***

community groups and women's NGOs. For the most part, while operating on a limited budget, these groups are dedicated to their work and interested in improving their capacity. Although the U.S. has done little in the past to build the capacity of Afghan women's civil society, the recently announced

assistance programs, the Literacy and Community Empowerment Program (LCEP) and the Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (I-PACS), have great potential to meet their needs.

The plans for LCEP and I-PACS provide solutions to many of the well-recognized challenges faced by women's civil society groups. Although their impact will ultimately be determined by how well each program is implemented, the responsiveness of the plans intimates their potential. The U.S. should nurture their potential by generously funding, actively monitoring, and consistently troubleshooting both programs.

As this paper explains, strong women's civil society institutions are one aspect of a strong civil society. The U.S. government must begin looking at the sector more broadly and begin funding new programs that link civil society groups, promote the autonomy of civil society, expand and protect the free flow of information, encourage a culture that values civil society, and build the capacity of women. The success of such programs will be a significant contribution to the future of Afghan women as well as the country as a whole.



## 9. Policy Recommendations

### Literacy and Community Empowerment Program (LCEP) Policy Recommendations

To best serve Afghan women and to gain the greatest possible returns on the U.S. government's investment in LCEP, the Women's Edge Coalition recommends that:

*The U.S. Congress should:*

- ▼ Support and expand LCEP in future years, assuming that monitoring and evaluation efforts indicate that it is accomplishing its goals.
- ▼ Complement LCEP with a well-funded effort, such as the Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (IPACS), to cultivate the leaders and NGOs currently working in Afghanistan.

*USAID should:*

- ▼ Hold implementing institutions accountable for follow-through on LCEP's plans to use local women's NGOs as implementing partners. If realized, LCEP could be a model for other U.S.-sponsored development projects.
- ▼ Use Afghan women's groups to carry out aspects of LCEP for which they have the capacity to avoid replicating and undermining the ongoing activities of local civil society. In particular, before LCEP activities commence, USAID should explore current efforts to reform curricula, train trainers and teachers, and provide village-level literacy courses.
- ▼ Coordinate with the National Solidarity Program (NSP) and other bilateral and multilateral efforts to build the capacity of CDCs, provide literacy training, and expand income-generating opportunities.

### Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (I-PACS) Policy Recommendations

To help Afghanistan garner the greatest benefit from I-PACS, the Women's Edge Coalition offers several recommendations:

*The U.S. Congress should:*

- ▼ Robustly fund I-PACS in future years, after monitoring and evaluation efforts indicate the initiative is accomplishing its goals.

- ▼ Require USAID to produce an annual report detailing the percentage of small grants funding, technical assistance, and capacity-building services that reached local NGOs. This information should accurately document the amount of funds devoted to women-led groups and men-led groups, formally registered NGOs and local development-oriented groups, and groups in each province.
- ▼ Require that at least 50 percent of the available small grants funding, technical assistance, and capacity-building services go to women-led groups, if the first annual report reveals that less than half of the groups directly benefiting from I-PACS are women-led.
- ▼ Require that at least 50 percent of the available small grants funding, technical assistance, and capacity-building services are devoted to established NGOs, as opposed to other types of women's civil society organizations, if the first annual report reveals that less than half of the groups directly benefiting from I-PACS are NGOs.

*USAID should:*

- ▼ Release I-PACS funding as early as possible in the U.S. budget cycle to give sufficient time to thoughtfully implement the program.
- ▼ Incorporate an Afghan women's advisory council into plans for I-PACS. This advisory council should include women civil society leaders who would advise the organization operating the small grants fund and providing training and technical assistance.
- ▼ Ensure that I-PACS participants and other women's civil society groups are being prepared to become conventional USAID grant recipients by training them in the needed skills. In particular, training could focus on: 1) familiarizing groups with applicable grant requirements, such as Past Performance References and Negotiated Indirect Cost Rate Agreements; 2) helping organizations compile necessary information; and 3) connecting them to appropriate staff in the USAID Kabul Mission.
- ▼ Convene a group of women civil society leaders to discuss gender-specific barriers to the national NGO registration process. This will also help determine if

particular practices on the part of the ministries implementing the proposed NGO law could facilitate NGOs compliance and participation. If the respondents recommend specific interventions, the administering NGO should support involved ministries in meeting the women's needs.

- ▼ Incorporate a substantive gender analysis component into all civil society assessment activities.

## General Recommendations for Building Civil Society in Afghanistan

*This section offers recommendations on how the U.S. government can build upon LCEP and I-PACS to build stronger civil society in Afghanistan.*

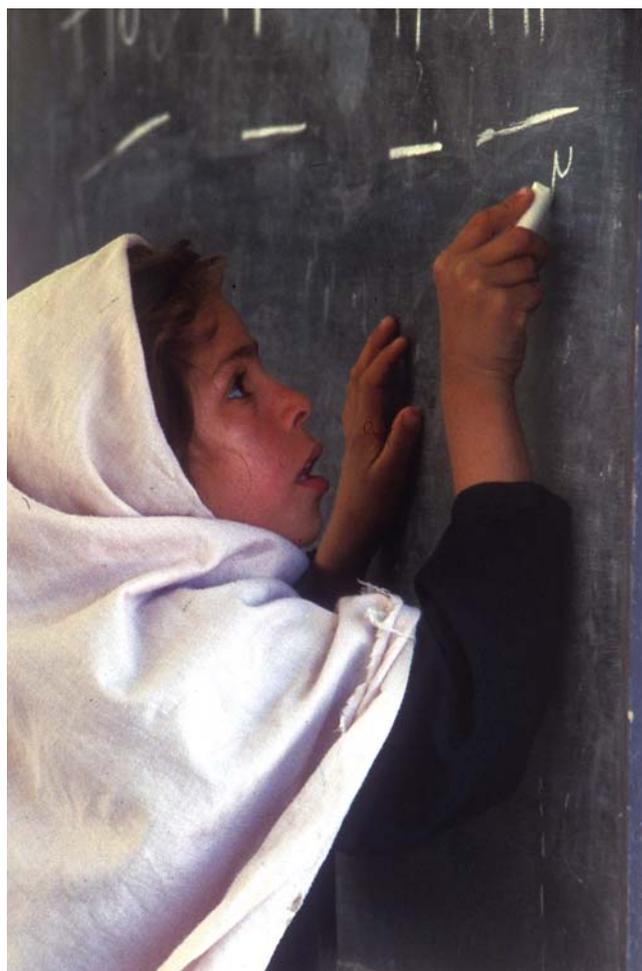
To help the Afghan women's civil society sector grow and thrive, the Women's Edge Coalition offers several recommendations.

*The U.S. government should put resources into efforts to:*

- ▼ Create a mechanism for coordinating the work of all civil society groups including NGOs, CDCs, and other groups to promote cooperation and communication and to prevent replication of projects. This may involve strengthening an existing mechanism or organization and/or creating a new approach.
- ▼ Develop regional advocacy networks by creating a program to link and network CDCs. This effort should not be done at the expense of I-PACS. I-PACS was developed to fund and build the capacity of existing groups and is not meant to help new groups get started.
- ▼ Create a systematic and large-scale women's leadership program that may include, but should not consist exclusively of, international exchange programs and scholarships. This program would respond to Afghan women's call for training in leadership skills to become more effective leaders.
- ▼ Finance the development of a strategic plan based on the I-PACS analysis of the civil society sector and commit sufficient resources to implement the plan. The strategic plan may include activities such as:
  - Promoting the autonomy of civil society by encouraging the government to enforce legislation that protects the role of civil society and provisions of the Afghan Constitution that guarantee the "creation of a civil society free of oppression, atrocity, discrimination, and violence based on the rule of law, social justice, protection

of human rights, and dignity, and ensuring the fundamental rights and freedoms of the people" and the right "to unarmed demonstrations for legitimate and peaceful purposes."

- Expanding the reach of the mass media to enable people throughout the country to have access to information; working with the Afghan government to promote freedom of the press.



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