

Afghanistan on the Eve of 2009 Election

By Jimmy Dabhi

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1. Introduction:

With some initial hiccups and discussions between President Karzai and the big powers, finally Afghanistan that has a population of nearly 28.2 million is gearing up for 2009 elections. Not everyone is enthusiastic about it, some are even pessimistic. Many do not see a bright future for Afghanistan. Many young people are even thinking of leaving the country. Some are sceptical of the quality and scope of democracy in Afghanistan. Pessimism may suppress people's hope and desire for freedom to a dignified life of a human being for a while but it cannot eliminate people's aspirations. Therefore in midst of this pessimism there are sliver lines of hope and aspiration for freedom. The understanding of democracy may vary from person to person (see Afghanistan in 2006) but one can sense the spirit of freedom in the air. The increase in school going children on the street especially girls, availability of number of news papers and some amount of freedom of expression of views therein, young women and men coming to the universities, number of women in the parliament (higher than the neighbouring countries) are indicative of some freedom in midst of pessimism. There are many opinions and views about democracy but a large population of Afghanistan want it to prevail.

This article highlights the status and the aspirations gathered in ordinary interactions with students and faculty of Bamyan, Herat and Kabul University. The article then discusses some of the issues currently facing Afghanistan. The issues highlighted here are gathered from literature, news reports and people's perceptions in individual conversations, class room interactions. This article also presents the way forward in various areas. The role of the civil society, NGOs and the State is briefly discussed at the end. Finally the paper concludes with the hope that people of Afghanistan, especially those who enjoy power, authority and comforts of life will continue to work hard and adopt a committed approach to create a more inclusive, violence free, gender just, poverty free and environment friendly Afghanistan.

2. Context of violent Conflict, diversity and struggle with hope:

War and bloodshed has soiled the socio-economic and political history of Afghanistan. It has made millions of people refugees, homeless, widows, orphans and left thousands dead. It has filled the common person's life with pain, insecurity, mistrust, trauma and distress. In spite of taking such a heavy toll on the people of Afghanistan and especially the women, children and other vulnerable groups, the population has shown resilience, hope and a will to survive and rebuild the country which in many aspects is in shambles.

2.1 Violent history of recent past:

The recent history of Afghanistan is smeared with invasion, civil war and violence on the international borders. Violent conflicts within and at the borders have contributed to making Afghanistan a weak State. The people belonging to rich and powerful class, including the warlords in Afghanistan with a greed for power, wealth and high need for domination within and outside are mainly responsible for ruining Afghanistan and its social and economic fabric. Internal and external politics of domination, manipulation and violence have been instrumental in tearing apart Afghanistan and her people. Globalisation has undermined the sovereignty of many developing countries and Afghanistan has been more vulnerable than others due to the three decades of civil war and foreign occupation that it has seen. Studies suggest that the growing influence of international institutions and the sway of multilateral

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agreements and initiatives in respect of law and human rights, humanitarian interventions and other military strategies challenge the autonomy of the State and undermine State sovereignty (Tonkiss, 2006). Afghanistan is no exception.

Years of conflict and neglect have taken a devastating toll on human, social and economic indicators in Afghanistan, resulting in some of the lowest human development indicators in the world. With an estimated HDI value of 0.346, Afghanistan falls at the bottom of the 177 countries ranked by the global Human Development Report of 2004, just above Burundi, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Sierra Leone.

2.2 Rich Ethnic Diversity and Nation Building:

Diverse ethnic communities have co-existed and lived in Afghanistan for a long time. It has provided colour and texture to Afghanistan's Society. The diversity has also been effectively manipulated for division and conflict. Dominance by one or two groups out of multiple ethnic groups causes grievance and ill feeling in those ethnic groups who feel deprived and marginalised. Afghanistan has to learn from history and ensure that interest and wellbeing of all the groups is taken care of by the government and various other agencies.

Building Afghanistan needs commitment from all groups. It has been found that "in ethnically diverse societies, ethnic groups claim power over a variety of issues such as development, education, health, land policy etc. and each of these issues therefore potentially become the central focus of power games and manipulation by the competing ethnic groups" (Sikoska and Solomon, 1999). A student in Bamyan last year said that ethnicity is greater than nationality in Afghanistan¹. This has potential for violence – "There can be several mechanisms through which ethnic identity and fractionalisation influence the risk of political conflict and violence" (Doyle and Sambanis, 2006:36). One has to view and negotiate ethnic loyalty and interest in a larger canvas of national interest of Afghanistan as a whole. Vulnerable communities, marginalised ethnic groups and deprived sections of Afghan society have to be included in the process of development and nation building. The more powerful ethnic groups have to be more responsible in sharing of power and resources. Political will and executive skills are needed to include all groups and communities in decision making, planning and sharing the fruits of development at all levels. Nepotism is taken for granted at all levels but it does not help in providing employment opportunities to all and especially to those who need them the most. Ethnic identities and diversity need to be respected and celebrated without neglecting the State. For Afghanistan to prosper, it cannot be allowed to be high jacked by one or two dominant groups, especially the elite classes within those groups.

2.3 Hope amidst insecurity and difficulties:

In the midst of all this it is very encouraging to read in news reports that since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, more than 4.2 million children have returned to school. Girls make up for just 35% of the school going children. However it is a huge increase

¹ This was mentioned by one of the students while discussing the issue of ethnicity, diversity, and social inclusion in the interaction with the III and IV year students of Bamyan University, Afghanistan, during my sessions on introduction to sociology and research methodology from 28th to 30th October 2008.

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compared to what prevailed during the Taliban regime where they were banned from schools.

People want a healthy Afghanistan where people do not suffer and die premature deaths due to lack of health facilities and health care for common citizens. Afghan women want to be seen and treated as equals at all levels including in the rebuilding of Afghanistan. All women especially single mothers and women from the poor strata of society want not only physical but also social safety and security for their children, their family and for themselves as well. Women, old people and the physically challenged do not want to sit on the streets and beg but want to find gainful employment.

Young people in Afghanistan want to study, find gainful employment, work hard to raise a family and live a dignified life. The cost of living is high in Afghanistan and many cannot afford it. In some cases, especially from some of the southern districts, people join military forces - either the government or the Taliban - because they need to feed their families. They do not want to be compelled to leave the country but instead want to contribute to the building of an Afghanistan that they will be proud of.

There is a big gap between people's expectations and their reality. Who is responsible for this mismatch between dreams and reality? Without playing a blame game we need to examine some of the issues which may throw light on what needs to be done, how and who can take greater responsibility?

3. Challenging Issues and the need for determined and gender just responses:

Rebuilding one's life, family, community and the country are arduous tasks. Afghanistan in the wake of the 2009 election is facing a number of issues which need to be addressed. The question is to identify these issues, prioritise them, debate and discuss these issues and plan, execute and monitor in such a participatory manner that no sexes, groups, communities, regions and sectors are excluded from these processes of reconstruction and rebuilding Afghanistan. The process is on and in many ways the implementation is supposed to be on. A number of groups are engaged in this planning and execution process. It is a very uphill task but with determination and well informed political will to govern by those in power; and active participation of the citizens aware of their rights and responsibility it is possible to hope for a more dignified, secure, peaceful and more equitable Afghanistan for all.

3.1 Gender discrimination and power imbalance:

In south Asia, patriarchy, rigid traditions and misinterpreted religiosity, dogmatism and practices disrespect women, their right to be and to become; Afghanistan is no exception. Violence and war affect both women and men but in the given socio-cultural, economic and political situation in Afghanistan, women, children, landless and people deprived of adequate livelihood are the most vulnerable. There are yet other indicators to suggest gender discrimination in Afghanistan. There are two-thirds of Afghan women and men over the age of 15 who cannot read and write and of course among these there are more women than men. People want equal opportunity and access to education for Afghan women and men. The BBC news reported that Afghanistan has some of the world's worst health indicators, with an average life expectancy of 43 years (BBC News, 25th November, 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7741767.stm; accessed on 13th April, 2009).

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About one in five children dies before his/her fifth birthday. The news also reported that the country has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world - at nearly one in 50 births. BBC on health status in Badakshan reported that for almost 16 babies born, one woman dies in labour (BBC News, 4th October 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/7646821.stm>; accessed on 13th April, 2009).

In the series of seminars organised by UNDP for Kabul University faculty and the UNDP Gender Equality Project at Kabul (UNDP, 2009), the participants talked about and discussed the gender discrimination and gender based violence that exists in Afghanistan like many other countries. In the discussions, it emerged how gender discrimination and violence hindered sustainable development, enjoying full citizenship of the country and power sharing in public and private domains in society. In the given culture, participation of women in public life becomes difficult and the ongoing conflict and lack of human security add to the difficulties women face. Afghanistan's constitution adopted in 2004 by an assembly of tribal representatives envisages a powerful presidency and defines Afghanistan as an Islamic republic, where men and women enjoy equal status before the law (Constitution Articles: 22 also see Articles 44, 53, 54, 83 and 84). The Benchmarks of Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) are very gender sensitive and in favour of gender balance empowerment and if implemented they have potential for social transformation.

As much as societal institutions such as family, educational institutions, work places, religion, media, community and government are capable of gender justice they are guilty of promoting and sustaining gender discrimination (Dabhi, 2005). Margaret Mills writes “The new Afghan constitution mandates gender equality, but the rule of law is still mostly an abstract concept in Afghanistan, due not only to re-intensifying violence, but also to a lack of personnel in all domains of governance (executive, judicial, legislative) trained to apply the laws that are being drawn up, or to ensure their compatibility with the Constitution” (Mills, 2008:6). Mills goes on to argue that “Practically speaking, recourse to court is costly (in travel, lost time and most significantly, in bribes and favours). Under these circumstances, women’s legal injuries hardly go to court”.

With credit to the people of Afghanistan, especially women, the HDR Afghanistan 2007 data suggests that compared to women Parliamentarians out of all Parliamentarians in South Asian Countries in 2006 (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Bhutan, India, Sri Lanka, Iran) Afghanistan is ranked high with 27.3 % which is much higher than India (8.3 %) and Iran (4.1 %). Still, political power for Afghan women in terms of decision making and power of implementing programmes is far from desirable. The Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) which focuses on women's opportunities (rather than the capabilities measured by GDI) cannot yet be fully calculated in Afghanistan because of data shortcomings. Nonetheless, figures currently in hand reveal gender inequality in three areas: political participation and decision-making power, economic participation and decision-making power and power over economic resources (HDR Afghanistan 2007:20).

National Action Plan for Women in Afghanistan (NAPWA) for the coming ten years is very commendable but a plan not implemented with unwavering political will fails to bring about a positive change in the country. It is rightly said “Sustainable

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development requires the full participation of all citizens in the economy, in democratisation processes, and in the protection of the environment. Tendencies which foster violence against women limit their ability to perform the roles required of them in both the private and the public sphere” (Bushra-El and Lopez, 1992:4).

3.2 Some unfulfilled promises and siphoning of Development Financial Assistance:

The data suggests a common and widely shared view that a lot of money has been poured into Afghanistan (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/7286307.stm; <http://www.jica.go.jp/afghanistan/english/pdf/afghanistan.pdf>) and yet one wonders where all that money has gone. One cannot rule out the fact that money has been promised but the promises are yet to be fulfilled as Bilal Sarwary has reported in ‘Unfulfilled promises haunt Afghanistan’ (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7451165.stm). George Alagiah reported in 2008 that ordinary Afghans have known for some time that the liberation of 2001 offered more promise than delivery. Even if this was the case there is a huge amount of financial support which has come in for specific support and projects and people are aware that the money has not gone where it should have – for development, health care, education, infrastructure such as roads, gutter system, affordable housing etc. No doubt, some work has been done. However after 8 years of change in regimes, people expect much more.

There are issues of governance, legislation, execution, management, financial and social audit to ensure that the resources are well used and put at the service of people and not pocketed by a few. Corruption and mismanagement high up is contagious and easily spreads in the entire system at all levels. Not much can be achieved by penalising small fry when the rich and powerful go scot-free. Corruption has to stop at all levels, beginning right from the top. It is the responsibility of the legislatures and executives that money allocated for various sectors and various projects is well utilised as per the schedules. The judiciary needs to play an active role in ensuring that the culprits are brought to justice.

3.3 Consumerism and Increasing Disparities between the haves and have-nots:

Consumerism and disparities between those who have and the masses that do not have is growing at an alarming rate in Afghanistan. Imitating the west in life style without having their kind of resources and management will not help us in Afghanistan. It will waste resources and increase the gap between the rich and the poor, fueling undesired conflicts between those who have and those who do not. There are a few who have plenty of wealth and assets (including narcotic funded architecture). On the other hand there is increasing poverty and destitution. The HPI focuses on deprivations, specifically those that limit a long and healthy life, a decent standard of living and lack of knowledge or exclusion from the world of reading and communication (UNDP 2006). The Human Development Report of Afghanistan states that at 62.3, the HPI for Afghanistan is one of the worst in the world, as many as 68 % of the population lack sustainable access to clean water and 50 % of Afghan children under five are underweight (HDR Afghanistan, 2007:19).

Amartya Sen’s definition of poverty includes lack of basic capabilities – health, education and literacy, reasonable housing conditions, safety which allows individuals to participate in social membership and to make choices in respect of their own lives (Sen, 1992); and this is what is experienced by a large number of people in urban and rural areas of Afghanistan. An estimate suggests that there are 60,000

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beggars of which 4000 are children in Kabul alone. Women with children begging on the street and some of them sitting in a puddle of water in the middle of Barakhy road in Kabul shivering in the cold are a common sight. The luxurious lifestyles of a few and glaring inequality is jarring when millions find it hard to make ends meet. Afghanistan at this stage needs productive and equitable use of finances and resources. Economic poverty relates to the role of finance, resources, possessions and what are standardly seen as economic poverty; and their role in curtailing capabilities (putting it differently the role of the same in severely restricting the choices people have to lead valuable and valued lives) and therefore poverty ultimately is a matter of 'capacity deprivation' (Drèze and Sen, 1998:11).

And therefore in Afghanistan's context, addressing poverty would mean capacitating its people - women and men, people in urban as well as rural areas. Peet Richard and Elaine Hartwick in their book 'Theories of Development' (2005) argue that in a strong sense, development means using the productive resources of society to improve the living conditions of the poorest people. Economic development which does not address the socio-economic disparities that exist in society will invite unrest, 'for stark poverty and riches can never coexist for long without producing disorder and violence' (Deb 2001:418). We in Afghanistan need to tie our boots; there is plenty to do for and with our people.

3.4 Development and quality of life in Rural and Urban areas:

Afghanistan is heavily dependent on agriculture and a large population lives in the rural areas. The rocky mountain terrain makes life difficult for the habitants of the remote areas. Communication and transport connecting rural and urban areas is in progress but security, weather conditions and corruption make things all the more difficult. It is said, "Present social and political conditions vary fairly dramatically between urban and rural populations, mainly because of infrastructural differences that limit everyone's choices, in such areas as health care, education and gainful employment...In both urban and rural settings, the health of families and their earning capacity could both be enhanced by women's education" (Mills, 2008:5-6).

The situation of many farmers and nomads who comprise about three-quarters of the Afghan population calls for concern and attention of various agencies particularly the government. An estimate suggests that only about 12% of the land is arable for such a big agrarian population. War and drought have left about half of the rural population in poverty. The snow and rain this year have been a blessing and have brought some relief to many.

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has a vision for Afghanistan "Expand irrigation throughout the country; enhance use of certified seeds in order to achieve household food security and make Afghanistan Food Self Sufficient. The mandate of FAO in Afghanistan is to support agricultural and environmental rehabilitation and assist the country to become a food secure and self-reliant nation in accordance with the principles of the National Development Framework of the Afghan Government" (<http://www.fao.org/world/afghanistan/>). Agriculture and animal husbandry provide food and living to an estimated 85 % of Afghanistan's population. The mandate of FAO in Afghanistan is to support the recovery and rehabilitation of agriculture and assist the country to become a food secure and self-reliant nation (http://www.fao.org/world/afghanistan/proj_en.htm). The well articulated vision and programmes need strong mechanisms of implementation and monitoring not only by

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FAO but also from the Central and Provincial government bureaucracy which need to exhibit political will and bureaucratic commitment on the ground.

Government will have to address the landlessness in rural area and land reforms so that in the absence of any livelihood options people have a piece of land to cultivate where it is viable. In urban sector housing it is becoming a major problem which needs to be addressed though low cost housing or allocation of land for housing and assistance to build for those who do not have shelter.

Government along with Province Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) have invested a lot of finance in reconstruction but still the progress is very slow and uneven. The causes and factors need to be examined to expedite the development. Getting community participation may help besides getting the NGOs engaged in the process. Roads, schools and health care centres in rural as well as urban areas have come up but monitoring their functioning and maintaining them is a herculean task in the given bureaucratic system and work culture. One wonders where the volunteerism inspired by Islam has disappeared in contributing for the betterment of the community.

It is rightly suggested that “Alternative resources, especially narcotics trade profits, compete with any incentive (force or financial) that international intervention can supply. If livelihoods are not served by progressive policies, progressive change won’t happen. This view may be vulgar materialism on my part, but physical survival is a most cogent force in Afghanistan” (Mills, 2008:9).

3.5 Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced:

“Landlocked and mountainous, Afghanistan has suffered from such chronic instability and conflict during its modern history that its economy and infrastructure are in ruins, and many of its people are refugees” (http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/south_asia/country_profiles/1162668.stm). My interaction with the returnees at Sahadat Township close to Herat city indicate that the problem of refugees and returnees is far from over.

The UNHCR (2003) reported that Afghanistan witnessed one of the largest repatriation movements in 2002, with more than 1.8 million refugees and some 600,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) returning voluntarily to re-establish their lives. Some three million still remain abroad. There has been massive internal displacement, especially in the south as a result of the insurgency - which has intensified since 2006. The government has a massive population of returnees and internally displaced population to take care of. The UNHCR has done commendable work in helping the ‘recognised’ refugees to return. The situation of unrecognised refugees in Iran and Pakistan is a major concern. A combined effort by many agencies and political will on the part of the governments is needed to integrate these people into mainstream Afghanistan. The rich and influential returnees can fend for themselves but what about those who have nowhere to go and no livelihood to depend on?

3.6 Health and Education – the pillars of Human Development:

Health and education are important pillars of human development. Afghanistan needs these pillars to be stronger and of quality. New reports suggest that a lot of resources have gone in to this and much has been done. Therefore it is heartening to see young girls and boys going to school, education centres and university. Education, research, development of people, development of public infrastructure and nation building go

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hand in hand and there is plenty of scope to enhance our efforts in this direction. The government must collaborate and encourage genuine NGOs to support the government in rebuilding the country especially in building the capacity of educational institutions (schools, universities, hospitals and health centres). Upgrading the competence and skills of faculty in the universities and medical colleges and hospitals has to be done with rigour. Experiences suggest that not all the faculty is motivated by love of knowledge alone but those who are must be encouraged and provided incentives.

The international community has a legitimate and relevant role to play if it wishes to do so. Dolling out money by big agencies or merely working for a feather in their cap to exhibit their achievements will not take us too far. Systematic and responsible concerted efforts are needed from the government to take civil society and good NGOs in confidence. A word on good NGOs when there is so much of scepticism about NGOs in Afghanistan is not out of place. I have elsewhere discussed NGOs at length (see Dabhi, 2003, 2008) but briefly we are referring here to Non-Governmental Organisation which are not for profit and engaged in socio-economic development at the local, national levels. Good NGOs can be categories as those who are sensitive to local cultures, are people centric, conscious of and make extra efforts to include the marginalised and excluded communities in their staff and programmes. These NGOs are careful in their recruitment and management policies so that they have diverse ethnic women and men as their staff, their life style is in attune with the people they work with and not jarringly different. These NGOs create local and national capacity by 'hand holding' so that people can gradually take care of their and that of community's wellbeing and development.

If one visits the remote provinces and districts one will realise that infrastructure and facilities for schools and hospitals still need attention. The local government and civil society must ensure that the created infrastructure is maintained well. When things are available freely there is a tendency to neglect maintenance of what is made available whether it is school, hospital, road or furniture. Greater transparency, accountability and trust have to be exhibited by all the parties for greater good of Afghanistan.

3.7 The Contribution of the International Community – What and how?

The responsibility of rebuilding Afghanistan needs to be more effectively shared, coordinated and scaled up (The Hindu, 2008). The tasks can be further distributed among the international community based on their competence and capability. For example a group of countries may like to take up social sector development; another group may jointly like to invest in public infrastructures facilities such as sewage, roads, electricity, water supply etc. Yet another set of countries can contribute in agriculture development and improvement of irrigation. The polluted and contaminated environment as well as depleting natural resources are serious threats to Afghanistan. Claims made in the BBC World Service One Planet programme suggest that the invasion may have left an unwelcome legacy for the country's environment and the health of its people (Azimi, 2008).

A few courtiers such as Germany, Italy, India, France, Canada, United Kingdom, United States of America and Japan have to specifically focus on these issues.

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Duplication as well as unequal distribution of resources in various provinces have to be avoided for inclusive development. Often it is the most remote and neglected provinces that need more attention and resources. ().

It is observed that many of the UN and allied agencies have staff which work for a very short duration of 6 to 12 months. Implementation and monitoring some of the programme suffers due to the high turn-over of staff members. Attention needs to be paid so that committed and competent staff are retained for adequate time to ensure programme sustainability and effectiveness. Some programmes face lot of hurdles because of bureaucratic hassles. Are there ways to ensure good system practices and yet do away with bureaucratic bottle necks?

3.8 Our Neighbours – Foes or friends?

Afghanistan expects support from the neighbouring countries, their governments and non-State actors to rebuild herself. The role played by the neighbouring countries of Afghanistan is looked at with certain apprehension. The polity, economy and culture have been and continue to be influenced by these neighbours in one way or the other. As much as they might have helped, they have also been part of the problems of Afghanistan. Therefore good relationships which enhance bilateral trade, technological development and overall well-being of both the countries are important. However the negative influence and impact need to be firmly resisted.

Afghanistan's foreign ministry must constantly watch and scan the intentions, attitudes and interests of its neighbours and other countries and constantly negotiate and frame policies and bilateral relation frame works where interests of both countries are taken care of. Often the interests of the rich and powerful groups, industries and lobbies play a pivotal role in framing these policies without much consideration for the large masses. Afghanistan has to invest in creating a political and civil service cadre inclusive of its diverse groups and communities which will help the country in home affairs as well as foreign affairs with their heart and mind rooted in the lives of common citizens of Afghanistan.

3.9 Nation Building and Engagement of Academia and Universities:

Peace building, reconstruction and rebuilding communities becomes difficult when competent human resources are lacking within the country. Afghanistan has suffered in this respect due to last three decades of war and regimes with policies that marginalized women and scholars. The feudal system, some of the rigid traditions (stronger among some ethnic groups than others), nepotism and exclusive ethnicity have played a role in curtailing freedom of thought, participatory and sustainable human development in Afghanistan.

The three Constitutional institutions (legislative, executive and judiciary) need competent, ethical and committed people in higher positions. Higher education, scientific and social research have suffered tremendously and consequently failed to provide human resources required to take up leadership roles at various levels. Universities, educational institutions and centres for higher learning and research play an important role in promoting quality human resources, knowledge and competencies. Visiting various universities one realises that assistance has been received and more is promised. Without wasting much money on exterior facades and heavy furniture a lot has to be ploughed into required facilities, laboratories, libraries, scientific, social research and experimentations.

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Experiences suggest that larger the university the more lengthy and rigid bureaucracy they develop if not careful. Some universities may have more power sharing and there for authority and decision making may be adequately delegated while some may remain highly centrally controlled at the detriment of larger departmental participation and autonomy for decision making. Thus investing in competent and committed human resources well thought out experiments with learning and education and evolving contextual and yet internationally recognised educational systems and curriculums may suffer. Universities and learning Institutions in Afghanistan have to find their way through diligently and learn from mistakes made by the other educational institutes and universities in other parts of the world.

Government at the province and national level need to assess the status of higher education and give priority to higher education along with primary education. A couple of good universities in each province and dormitory facilities for girls and boys to study will help a great deal and reduce the pressure on the few universities there is now. Social diversity and inclusion, conflict, violence and peace, gender equality, rural development, environment and other relevant subjects to socio-economic, cultural and political situation of Afghanistan need to be included in the university leaning agenda if not there already. Private institutions for learning are coming up in Afghanistan and there may be a danger like elsewhere that education may become and commodity for sale and therefore those who can afford will buy this commodity while many who cannot will have no access to quality education. The government will have to ensure that there are universities and institutions for higher leaning spread in all the provinces in due course so that all the citizens have the opportunity and access to higher education.

Universities, research organisations and academia have to do their bit in terms of carrying out research at various levels, providing data and analysis so that the policies and programmes designed and implemented by the government and other agencies are more informed and effective. Inclusive and sustainable development needs sustained research in various sectors.

4. The Role of Civil Society, NGOs and the State:

In the 21st century non-governmental organisations, also called civil society organisations, have become important actors in development at the local, national and international level (see Dabhi, 2008). The United Nations has given the sector a special recognition and space in its functioning. The local as well as international NGOs must be credited for the good work they have done. However caution is required to ensure that their life style and their salaries do not upset the purchasing power of the locals and ordinary wage earners. Security is a problem for many of these NGOs to work at the grassroots but bearing in mind this limitation greater care and concern is needed so that assistance and support goes where needed most. People also must be considerate not to demand unreasonable and unsustainable salaries from NGOs which have a genuine desire to contribute to the development of Afghanistan. NGOs have their limitations and not all NGOs are capable and committed to the empowerment of people (see Dabhi, 2009) but a few definitely make a difference in accompanying people in the process of human development. NGOs, over time, must play a supportive role, allowing people's leadership to emerge and take lead. This requires that NGOs invest in human resource development and capacity building. NGOs must help in the process of building people's alliances with various marginalised communities and especially with women's groups (see Dabhi, 2004).

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Talking and interacting with government officials one is made aware of the bad experiences they have had with some NGOs. Afghanistan cannot afford to frighten good people and good NGOs who genuinely wish to stand by Afghanistan in spite of all difficulties. In dialogues with NGOs, the NGO department hopefully will develop a system which is more focused on accountability, transparency and effectiveness rather than mere controlling and discipline.

Afghanistan needs to develop a strong civil society as well. Broadly, the term civil society points to that section of society which is distinct from the State machinery and market and does not represent their interests. Clark (2003:3) defines civil society as the collective activities of citizens for purposes of social change rather than individual gain – it is far from homogenous, and not always civil. Of course civil society is always diverse and often fragmented. However, democracy to flourish requires a vibrant civil society and civil society organisations. A civil society focused on public interest and public action is often a challenge and threat to people in power, establishments and vested interests but then without it democracy becomes weak.

In our enthusiasm for change and good governance, we must not forget that ‘civil society is no alternative to an elected government; instead, it serves to make democracy more effective by constructing bridges linking decision-makers with the people most affected by their decisions’ (Clark 2003:14). A system of governance at the provincial level and at the centre in adherence with the constitution is vital in creating, securing and rebuilding Afghanistan.

The Afghan Research & Evaluation Unit (AREU, 2007) in its report stated “Afghanistan faces intensifying threats from insurgency, opium and popular discontent. While these threats require immediate action, they will be properly solved only by the emergence of a stronger state and comprehensive improvements in governance”. A stronger state and quality of polity are not going to be easy because “the opium economy by all accounts is a massive source of corruption and undermines public institutions especially in (but not limited to) the security and justice sectors. There are worrying signs of infiltration by the drug industry into higher levels of government and into the emergent politics of the country. Thus it is widely considered to be one of the greatest threats to state-building, reconstruction, and development in Afghanistan” (Buddenberg and Byrd, 2003:1). Some estimates suggest that Afghanistan's drug industry constitutes around 60% of the economy and of course money can buy and sell power including people in position of power.

Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the Secretary General of the United Nations (from 1992-1996) once said “Development and democracy contribute to the common prosperity of humanity, to the blossoming of societies where social harmony, the Rule of law, the respect of human Rights and dignity are indeed attainable ideals”. Good governance can uphold democracy and promote sustainable development. Afghanistan needs a strong democracy (not dictated by the others for their own vested interests) and systematic sustainable and inclusive development.

Boutros-Ghali went on to say, “More than an institutional framework, however, democracy is a state of mind — a culture favouring tolerance, respect of the other and his or her differences, pluralism of opinion, freedom of expression and dialogue. It is a set of shared values, which belong to the common patrimony of mankind. These are fundamental principles without which there would be no democracy, no sustainable project of development. In order to take on any true significance, however, they

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should be reflected in the relationships which oppose and unite all individuals — from the social, political and economic institutions to the local actors and members of civil society”. Afghanistan has a good gender sensitive constitution and required policy framework to begin with. The civil society, the NGOs and the government need to cooperate and collaborate for larger public good. The people of Afghanistan and those who work in Afghanistan must work towards strengthening people-centric democracy, gender just policies, programmes and legislations, judiciary committed to justice and civil service ready to minister to the society; attitude and laws to protect depleting natural resources and safe guard our environment.

5. Conclusion:

We have highlighted the violence soaked history of Afghanistan. We also have briefly discussed the rich ethnic diversity and seen how nation building requires respect for ethnic identities as well as allowing the celebration of diversity to build Afghanistan as a strong state which is inclusive and sensitive to the interest of various communities. The article has discussed various issues and challenges facing Afghanistan today such as gender discrimination and required political will to emerge as a gender just society. The article also dealt with consumerism and increasing disparity between rich and poor and the potential danger of widening this gap. Then the situation of the refugees, returnees and internally displaced was discussed and it was stated that the problem is far from over and much needs to be done for this large section of people. Health and education - the two pillars of Human Development were highlighted and it was said that much has been done but there is still a lot more that can be done by various agencies. The role of the international community was then examined. Following that the role played by our neighbours was explained and Afghanistan's stance was suggested. Last but not the least the role and responsibility of academia and universities was highlighted. In the following section we discussed the role of civil society, NGOs and the State. A strong state with a strong and responsible civil society was suggested. The NGOs role and legitimacy were discussed along with their limitations. It was suggested that all the three actors were important in rebuilding Afghanistan. The Article highlighted that responsible democracy was important for sustainable development. Political will on the part of the elected members of the government, competent and knowledgeable civil servants and a vigilant civil society would expedite the task of rebuilding Afghanistan to become more inclusive, gender just, hunger free and environment friendly.

Let me end by saying that people of Afghanistan deserve a better quality of polity and life. It is possible and needs political will on the part of the politicians, ministers and determination of the part of the bureaucrats for effective execution of good policies and programmes. The citizens of Afghanistan expect politicians, ministers and bureaucrats to serve people and not lord over them. We need to create an enlightened, responsible and competent cadre of politicians and bureaucrats in Afghanistan. One does not need to import them, we need to encourage those who are good and promote and train more of them in the years to come for more effective and people-centric governance in Afghanistan.

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