



Interview by STEFANO VECCHIA

Dear Fr. Jimmy, sincere thanks for your availability.

I send you a few questions for the interview. Please, feel free to answer and elaborate at your will.

Best wishes

Stefano

Dear Stefano,

Here is the response to your interview questions.

Warm regards and best wishes,

Jimmy C. Dabhi s.j.

1. What is the Afghanistan Research and Development Institute and why it was established?

The Afghan Research and Development Institute (ARDI), Kabul, a Jesuit initiative is a Non-Governmental Organisation established in 2009 to response to the challenges of nation-building and a new emerging socio-cultural, and economic order of Islamic Republic Afghanistan. Through research and educational efforts the Institute wants to engage in the process of human development, human capacity building and empowerment of the people especial the less privileged and socially excluded groups and communities in Afghanistan.

The **Mission** of ARDI is *to work for human development in Afghanistan through social research, education and development actions.*

2. What of your experience at the head of Indian Social Institute in Delhi is applicable here end on what issues, in case?

As the head of Indian Social Institute (ISI) i had visited Afghanistan on some teaching and capacity building assignment. The Social research, publication and capacity building expertise of ISI are applicable and useful here. I was engaged in leading the organisation in research, writing, engagement with civil society on advocacy issues and capacity building in development management. I have been able to use these expertise and competencies through ARDI to some extent in the field of higher education, capacity building, awareness and publication. ARDI has been able to conduct a few courses in the university, facilitate capacity building trainings for NGOs, write articles and publish.

3. In your opinion and knowledge, what is left of the past cultural grandeur of Afghanistan, and along what lines the culture is developing?

Culture is not static, it is shaped and changed over the years by circumstances, changing socio-political and economic situation, interaction with other people and cultures. Such is the case here in Afghanistan.



Some reconstruction of monuments and historical places has taken place for example the tomb of Babar and the garden have been renovated. The Buddha caves have been given attentions. The literature, poetry, music and art which were taboo in Taliban regime are slowly being revived and encouraged. Beside artefacts and monuments; places the customs, beliefs and life style are also part of culture. One sees here feudal, patriarchal and gender discrimination strongly rooted in culture along with modernity in dress and lifestyle. There is a strong consumerist culture developing here where you may find most advance cell phones, furniture, decorative items in the market but the streets are often in a miserable and filthy state even in cities like Kabul. As in most society men enjoy more freedom, access and power whether it is politics, economics, education, health or entertainment. Some ethnic cultures are more conservative and patriarchal than others.

4. Does exist in the country a civil society, a core of intellectual individuals and institutions that can have a role among tribalism, politics and faith? If affirmative, how are able to act in the present situation?

Broadly speaking civil society is distinct from the State apparatus and Profit making sector and does not represent their interests. Civil society in this respect is collective activities of citizens for purposes of social change. Thus in the strict sense civil society exists in all the countries in varying degrees. The point is how strong, inclusive, articulate and committed it is to public good. The more vibrant democracy the more vibrant civil society is. Afghanistan is an emerging democracy and so is the civil society. By and large the civil society is pepped up by UN bodies and International community. Many of the social issues and problems such violation of rights of people, religious, ethnic and regional discrimination; corruption and nepotism go unchallenged. The educational institutions are not free of corruption and politicisation and thus barring a few voices it does not provide the intellectual impetus as one would wish to strengthen the civil society. There is need for more research based writings on social issues, policy advocacy through intellectual endeavours and greater participation of academia in civil society. The religious leaders have quite an influence on the people but not much support for human rights and freedom from this leadership.

5. What are the main issues still left in the country that we may see as obstacles towards a real development and what is the role of the religion in this development?

There are number of issues which are vital for development of Afghanistan as a nation and people. Let me list a few as i see them. Poverty which will include lack of food security, poor health care, inadequate and poor shelter in the severe cold in many parts of the county, growing disparity between rich and poor, gender discrimination, poor governance, siphoning of aid money (politely worded means lack of aid-effectiveness) and corruption, culture of dependency (90 percent of the country's budget is met by international community), unsustainable high salaries of NGO staff starting with UN bodies. Afghanistan it is an Islamic Republic and



therefore religion is an important and integral part of life. Religion is seen as supportive of human development. However there is strong element of conservativeness and religious extremism and many regret them.

6. How is and could be the role of foreign institutions in order to help the development of a new culture and, lastly, a more united and modern Afghanistan?

The international community is both appreciated and disliked especially the USA. Sometime one gets an impression that it is tolerated because without aid-assistance the economy of Afghanistan will collapse. No doubt a some good has been done in Afghanistan especially in the sector of restoring governance system, infrastructure, education, health and capacity building of bureaucrats and arm forces.

Violence and retaliation is also triggered of by the presence of the presence of international community, especially the NATO forces. On the other hand there is feared that their withdrawal might help the extremists to come to power and the country may sleep into a bloody civil war. Thus presence of the international community is both part of the solution and problem as well.

It must be noted that the Taliban are not the only responsible actors for insecurity, the local warlords, drug mafia, transport lobbies, timber mafia, security companies (foreign and local) the politicians, business rivals, neighbouring countries and other international players, all have their share in creating, sustaining insecurity. Insecurity in some way is a blessing in disguise for some including the NGO personnel and the UN staff. Insecurity may have decreased the movement of this international community personnel but it has substantially increased their 'risk monetary allowance'. Thus establishing security will hit pockets of many specially those benefit from it (Afghans and foreigners). Security is necessary for development but will not come easy unless the political and economic gains from insecurity are addressed.

Quite much of the development taking place is top down. For various reasons the people's participation in planning, implementation and delivery is limited. It seems to be more donors driven than need driven. The NGOs are pressed for time in completed the largely short term projects and utilising the money including the UN projects and programmes. One of the civil society members in a hunger free campaign stated that growth is taking place in Afghanistan but not development.

The wider awareness of development is lacking in Afghanistan. NGOs work with their own guidelines and policies. There is lack of trust between government and NGOs for right reasons. This trust building will improve with transparency, accountability and aid effectiveness. But all the development actors need political will and commitment to people's interest and less of their vested interests.

The dependency culture of development created by UN bodies will take time to be transformed into participatory and contributive development efforts. Concerted



efforts are required for coordination and synergy within international community as well as government bodies at the province and national level.

International forces and the presence of internal community need to revisit their purpose of being here, assess the outcome in terms quality, quantum, effectiveness and reach. The assessment must take into account the situation and feedback from the common people, people from remote areas and not just rhetoric of the creamy layer fattened by the milk of the ‘foreign cow’.

7. Some personal note on your work as a foreigner and as a non-Muslim in this country in terms of acceptance and possibility of pursue the goals of the Institute.

So far i have not faced any difficulty as a non-Muslim. The local treat the Indians well. As an ‘ustad’ (teacher) i get more respect from common people. My Christian identify is not important for me and neither for most people here. To be and to do good my human identity is enough. I am sure there may be a few people who may suspect my intent of being here and my love for Afghanistan but that is part of life. This kind of experience of ‘being suspected’ i experienced in India as well by some right wing nationalists, though i happen to be an Indian. So far the feedback received from students, staff and other is positive. They welcome the educational and capacity building intervention by us. One of the constrain we experience is the financial constrain to reach out to many more. Life is expensive to maintain oneself and to carry out the work we do.

For me people are human beings first whatever may be their religious identity and affiliation. As a Jesuit i think my primary calling is to work and contribute to human wellbeing, social justice and human development more so of the poor and marginalised. In Afghanistan, the poverty, the lack of education, the ethnic, gender and religious discrimination, the urban-rural divide and disparity of filthily rich and rural and urban poor reinforced my decision to come to Afghanistan. In the present global scenario so much of anti-Muslim feelings and behaviour is generated because of some events and action of a few people. For the actions of a few the entire Muslim communities are blamed, badly treated and their national identities, loyalty and love for humanity are doubted. In such a situation i think that greater Jesuit engagement in social research, education and development in Muslim countries is required.

There are times when i feel afraid and feel insecure. I have already seen a few explosions and just two months back we had a suicide bomb attack on a security firm 150 feet away from where i live in a rented house. We had some window panes of our house shattered. But these fear and insecurity is experienced by my Afghan sisters and brothers, it is nothing new.

With all the difficulties, violence and mess there are human communities like anywhere else who want to live a normal human life. It is this aspiration of ordinary people, children and students motivate me to be here and do my bit.

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Increase thirst for knowledge, small and weak yet slowly increasing the voices from the margins, increasing participation of women in public life and civil society are signs of hope that human development is possible however hard it may be at present.

Let me conclude this interview 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. The international community and the neighbours need to be genuinely interested in supporting Afghanistan as a sovereign nation and not manipulate it to server their vested interests.