

# The Age of Youth: The Peaceful Shaping of Afghanistan's Transition Decade

## Summary

Since the fall of the Taliban, Youth have emerged as an important political and economic force in Afghanistan. They are one of the most important demographic groups, with nearly two-third of the population being under the age of 25 years.

In a country where leadership is traditionally concentrated in the hands of male elites of a certain age and standing, youth have started to push into the political and economic arena demanding their rights to be included as well as offering the skills they were able to hone over the past 12 years.

Youth feel that they have much to contribute to peace and reconciliation as well as regional stability due to:

- Being untainted by past involvements in conflict and fighting; pledging to not repeat past mistakes.
- Acceptance of the diversity of Afghan society and welcoming of inclusive and participatory democratic structures.
- Commitment to a democratic process that offers peaceful change over more violence.
- Ability to network across ethnic and tribal groups and reach out to their peers in the insurgency
- Focus on regional cooperation rather than competition.

## 1 Introduction

Never a small country to begin with, Afghanistan is currently facing the classic dilemma of least developed countries: rapid population growth<sup>1</sup> and an increasingly young population: those under the age of 25 make up nearly two-third of the Afghan population (estimated at around 30 million).<sup>2</sup> This demographic shift presents a country that has historically excluded youth (and women) from key decision making while focussing power in the hands of older male elites, with a challenge: How to incorporate youth meaningfully into the political process.

**Youth is a social construct that is subjective and context-specific. The 2013 Draft Afghan National Youth Policy defines youth within the Afghan context "as a person who is between the age of 18 and 30."**

Youth can be both a force of transformation and a force of conflict. Some analysts suggest that a society unable to absorb new generations is more conflict prone than others. Anti-government groups in Afghanistan, but also pro-government militia, are getting increasingly young; "there aren't many suicide bombers over 20 years old."<sup>3</sup>

This policy paper presents the outcomes of three youth conferences facilitated by The Liaison Office (TLO) between January and April 2014. The program aimed to provide a platform for approximately 100 young women and men from seven youth organizations (about 20% women) to discuss pertinent issues about the involvement of youth in Afghanistan's future. All three events also included a few selected Afghan politicians, academics and prominent civil society activists in order to foster inter-generational engagement.

The conferences offered a unique opportunity to participants to express their views, concerns and expectations on the future of Afghanistan and begin formulating a shared vision about the role of youth on key issues. Key outcomes are presented here.

## 2 The Role of Youth in the Transformation Decade

“Our society is transitioning from darkness to light, a society free of violence and instability. We should use this opportunity.”

*Member of Solidarity Network for Change*

The ongoing presidential elections where the incumbent is not allowed to run for a third time as well as the handover of security from international to Afghan National Security Forces presents a critical juncture in the modern history of Afghanistan. It also ushers in a decade

(2014-2024) of transition, change and transformation; where youth could play an important role if allowed more access to the political and decision-making process.

In spite, or because, of persistent corruption, poor governance, and the dominance of a generation of wartime elites unwilling to share power, youth have begun pushing into the political and social arena through the formation of political, civic and cultural groups and movements.

Alone in numbers youth present a sizeable dynamic force, which if harnessed and supported, can be a constructive force for change and peace. For this to be achieved, however, youth must further augment their leadership, mobilization capabilities and clarify their vision through inter-youth dialogue and engagement.

## 3 What Youth Bring to Politics and the Peace Table

During the conference discussions, youth outlined the following qualities they would bring toward furthering the political and economic developing in Afghanistan.

**First**, given their non-involvement in past war-efforts, youth feels that they represent a fresh and untainted force in Afghan politics. In the opinion of most participants, the previous generation of leaders suffer from a legitimacy crisis due to their part in Afghanistan's war history, bringing to power a corrupt and unresponsive government, unable to foster peace and not providing a good role model to the younger generation, especially

upcoming leaders. Youth activists expressed a strong desire not to repeat the mistakes made by leaders in the past and focus on an inclusive and participatory political process and democratic change model.

**Secondly**, the period since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, has provided youth with the experience of living in a democratic system, with a majority committed to continue down this path despite its flaws. It has proven that change can be achieved without fighting and that continuing the democratic struggle is well worth their (and the country's) while. The impressive voter turnout on 5 April 2014 bore witness to how much Afghans (especially youth) across the country were willing to use the democratic process for change, defying bad weather, long journeys, and waiting time, as well as Taliban threats.

**Third**, youth have managed to accumulate significant leadership and technical skills to prepare them for playing a greater role in leading Afghanistan toward political stability and sustainable economic growth. The past 12 years presented youth with an as of yet unmatched period of opportunity to expand their horizon outside a war machine; something that makes their mindset different from the old elites clinging to power.

For the first time in the past 30-plus years of war, increased access to education, both basic and higher, gaining experience by working in the Afghan government, international and national (non-governmental) organizations as well as

study-abroad visits has produced a new generation of young men and women that is not only committed to their country but also brings a skill set with them that can introduce new styles of politicking and leadership to their country.

This interest in participating in the democratic process was already witnessed in 2014, where a considerable number of young individuals pushed into the political process by nominating themselves for Provincial Council Elections. For example, from out of 996 candidates from Bamyan, Herat, Kandahar, Khost, Balkh, Kabul and Nangarhar, 31% (309) were under the age of 36.<sup>4</sup> Thus youth are willing to break with tradition, where they had to await reaching a certain age and standing to have their voices heard.

**Fourth**, the technological revolution, especially in social networking has allowed youth an unprecedented ability to network within and outside their country. This has presented them with an opportunity to break the traditional ethnic and tribal mobilization of past leaders, which has been proven divisive for Afghanistan. Focussing on being Afghan, youth activists at the workshops emphasized solidarity across tribal and ethnic groups and foster inclusive and cooperation rather than division and inter-ethnic rivalry and fighting. Acknowledging that some youth still cling to the ways of past leaders, they emphasized a need to foster understanding and forge unity across ethnic and tribal lines.

**Finally**, in addition to political leadership, youth have also shown an entrepreneurial spirit, ready to take risks in innovative new business ideas and models that previous generations have not dared to broach. A country where business has traditionally focussed on trade has created young entrepreneurs (including women) in the areas of construction, IT systems and technology, media and communication, research and consulting, as well as transport and logistics. This has provided a younger generation with the access to resources to invest into Afghanistan's future and create much-needed jobs for their peers and coming generations.

## 4 View of Youth on Key Issues in Afghan Politics

In their discussions, youth also tried to formulate their view on two key issues for the next decade of transformation: Peace and reconciliation and regional integration.

“We want peace, but we oppose concessions which compromise our fate and that of future generations”

*Member of Afghanistan 1400*

### 4.1 Peace and Reconciliation

In the opinion of all, the future of Afghanistan hinges on peace. In the eyes of most participants, however, the government of Afghanistan has failed to make significant progress in this area.

Furthermore it has lacked transparency as to whom the government is willing to

negotiate with, what it is willing to sacrifice and for what outcome. Youth participants were clear that only a transparent peace process would be a successful one and without the inclusion of a much more broad-based segment of the Afghan population, especially youth, they would neither be successful nor sustainable.

Furthermore, rather than ‘buying’ fighters through financial incentives, there is need for addressing deeper rooted socio-political and economic problems that lead young men to join the insurgency to begin with.

Furthermore, instead of giving up on past gains, the government should show a hard stance in making the acceptance of the Afghan constitution and democratic process a precondition for a peace deal. Past gains, especially women, minorities and human rights, should not be sacrificed or given up; otherwise peace can be neither positive nor sustainable. The insurgency needs to be made understand that a majority of Afghans are in favour of the current political system and do not wish to revert to one that does not guarantee a participatory, inclusive system and broad-based rights.

Participants also stressed that in light of Afghanistan's complex conflict no one country in the region held the key to stabilizing Afghanistan. Thus, the Afghan government should increase its efforts to seek peace through a regional engagement by engaging its regional and global allies in order to find a common solution to the war in Afghanistan. This should include an

increased pressure on neighbouring countries seen as supportive of the Taliban rather than regional peace.

“Regional integration is the only way to bring stability to the region”  
*Member of Afghanistan Analysis and Awareness (A3)*

## 4.2 Regional Cooperation

Flowing from the discussion on peace and reconciliation, youth felt that a lack of a shared political vision has been the primary obstacle to regional cooperation in the South-Central Asian region. Rather than working on a shared political vision on how to tackle common regional challenges including insecurity and instability, the smuggling of drugs, weapons and humans as well as labour migration and water management, tense neighbourly relations prevail.

Youth acknowledged that their own government has lacked a consistent foreign policy strategy toward the other countries in the region for the past 12 years; which was in dire need of change. The foreign policy of the Karzai administration was largely driven by responding to the developments of daily events which had negative repercussions affecting both foreign and domestic policy issues.

Youth suggested that instead, Afghanistan should focus on its deep cultural ties with the countries in the region and geographic position as a bridge between Central Asia,

South Asia and the Middle East. Rather than competition with neighbours, Afghanistan should lobby for changed political behaviour of neighbouring countries emphasizing the benefits of political and economic cooperation.

For this, youth participants suggested that the Afghan government should develop a clear regional strategy, in particular on how to enhance its human capital (regional collaboration on education projects), extract natural resources (agreements that allow Afghanistan to benefit most from the extraction and keep processing in the country) and build infrastructure (collaboration on dams, railways, telecommunication, etc.).

Politically, youth raised the need to put more energy into the Istanbul Process and to swiftly sign the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the United States.

Economically, youth felt Afghanistan could become more active in regional bodies such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Economic Cooperation Association (ECO), World Trade Organization (WTO), and Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). They felt there was a need to work on the Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA); Economic Cooperation Organization’s Free Trade Area (ECOTA); South Asia Free Trade Area (SAFTA), and Afghanistan-Pakistan Trade and Transit Agreement (APTTA), to make them active processes rather than paper tigers.

Two projects were especially highlighted for their potential to emphasize regional economic cooperation over political competition: the Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline (also known as Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India Pipeline, TAP or TAPI) and the Central Asia South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project (CASA-1000). There is the perception that through the implementation of these projects the countries in the region will experience the win-win situation of economic collaboration, which would also provide a good entry point to improve neighbourly relations overall.

Youth also felt the Afghan government could do more in encouraging foreign investment into the country, for example through enhancing and upgrading the transportation and road networks, the legal regulatory framework for business transactions and other steps to create an enabling environment that will contribute to boosting the economy of Afghanistan.

Last but not least, young leaders argued that Afghanistan must foster the willingness to cultivate close but mutually beneficial ties with the other countries in the region, and must internally strive for good governance and the eradication of poppy cultivation so that Afghanistan can secure the trust of other countries in the region and focus with them on essential projects to strengthen the region as a whole.

#### 4.3 Youth Contribution to Peace, Reconciliation and Regional Cooperation

Youth felt particularly well placed to contribute in these areas for the following reasons:

- They bring a fresh perspective and more neutral image to the peace talks because they are untainted from the past years of war.
- Many youth have received training in methods of peaceful conflict resolution that older leaders lacked.
- The fact that the Taliban mid-level leadership and fighters are increasingly young themselves, youth feel they can speak to the insurgency as a peer group, rather than as patronizing leaders who call for peace when they were themselves unable to foster it.
- Their experience in exile and/or studying abroad has given youth a unique regional perspective older leaders lack, as well as linkages to democratic forces in neighboring countries having a similar positive vision of peace for the region
- Especially at the grassroots level enhanced interaction between the youth of the countries in the region can bring the peoples and politicians of the region closer.

“Yesterday’s experience – Today’s action and Future’s plans.”

*Trend 3 Organization Motto*

## 5 Challenges for Youth to Realize their Full Potential

In addition to identifying what youth could contribute to the future of their country, participating youth groups also did some soul-searching in order to identify major institutional and leadership challenges they face.

**First**, they felt that there is a lack of institutional interaction among civic-political youth groups, particularly relevant to the relationship between urban and rural youth. A culture of competition prevalent to Afghan politics so far prevails. This has resulted in the absence of a coherent voice of the youth and their effectiveness in major national processes.

**Secondly**, a portion of the youth still allows themselves to be manipulated and instrumentalized by wartime elites and join into existing parties that emphasize ethnic, linguistic and religious differences. Youth should rise above this tendency of ethnic and tribal entrepreneurship and focus on inclusion, participation and exchange.

**Thirdly**, youth have not yet shown the same ability to mass-mobilize as in other countries such as the Arab Spring in the region. Participants of the workshops stressed that youth organizations must work harder to instil a sense of responsibility among the youth across Afghanistan, and a willingness to voluntarily participate in activities for change.

**Last but not least**, more thought is needed on how to involve young women into the process. Though more open than previous generation, young Afghan men need to work harder to provide an enabling environment for young women to join into their ranks. While some movements have achieved solid participation of women, others are still gender-specific (either all men or all women), and the youth dialogue workshops did not achieve an equal participation of young women into the process.

Even the organizers of this process acknowledged that more could have been done to reach out to youth organizations and movements focussing on women and bring them into the discussion with other organizations. The divide and focus on all-male vs. all-female organizations needs to be overcome and young men need to come out much stronger in support of women's political and economic participation and rights. One way to achieve this could be to work with the Afghan National Youth Policy once adopted.

“We should know where the youth are, what they are up to, and what goals they pursue.” *Member, New Line Organization*

## 6 Recommendations: Supporting the Role of Youth in the Transformation Decade

### To Youth and International and National (Civil Society) Actors

- Continue to strengthen and support a young leadership not driven by ethnic, sectarian and linguistic agendas, which have caused considerable damage to Afghanistan.
- Advocate for youth unity over instrumentalization for ethnic and tribal politics.
- Support the mobilization of youth in broad-based political and civic organizations across Afghanistan with a strong focus on bridging provincial, regional as well as rural and urban divides.
- Enhance networking of youth organizations in the region and particularly neighboring countries, which are active in peace processes (Track 3 Youth Exchange).
- Support youth advocacy for a peaceful and democratic struggle and help them to reach out to youth preyed on by insurgency and militia groups for recruitment into their fighting ranks.

### To the Afghan Government:

- De-polarizing politics; through recruitment and employing of committed youth, we try to end the

### Overview of Participating Youth Groups

**Afghanistan Analysis and Awareness (A3)** was formed in 2009 by a group of young educated Afghans with the aim of providing recommendations and strategic direction to help policy makers, both Afghans and internationals, better formulate their strategy and intervention to ensure a stable and prosperous Afghanistan.

**Afghanistan 1400** declares itself as the national movement of Afghanistan's new generation. Established in 2012, it is a civic-political movement that tries to mobilize the younger generation of Afghanistan for the future political, social and economic leadership of Afghanistan.

**New Line Organization (NLO)** is composed of mainly young students and media activists. The group focuses on addressing social problems and elections observation. It was formed in 2012. NLO regularly organizes debates among the youth in Kabul.

**Solidarity Network for Change (SNC)** was formed by a group of civil society activists, literary figures and young politicians in 2012. SNC envisions a stable and developed Afghanistan equipped with active domestic and foreign policies based on popular will and national interests of Afghanistan.

**Trend 3 Organization** is composed mainly of young government officials. They are active in social and political issues. It was formed in 2014.

**Wadan Afghanistan Gond (WAG)** is rapidly growing moving toward becoming a political party. WAG concentrates on rural youth, mobilizing them for political activism and influencing policies affecting their lives. WAG was established in 2012.

**Youth for Change Afghanistan Organization (YCAO)** is a youth-led effort aiming for positive change in the lives of Afghans through social engagement, youth empowerment and youth participation in the decision-making processes.

recruitment of groups and individuals  
espouse violence and corruption.

- De-politicizing the bureaucracy: the performance of the civil administration should be enhanced and kept away from political meddling. Educated and competent youth should be employed through a transparent recruitment process.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> UNFPA, *State of the World Population 2013*,  
<http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/global/shared/swp2013/EN-SWOP2013-final.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> *National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment 2011-12*.  
Afghanistan Living Condition Survey; p.xvi

<sup>3</sup>Read more: <http://www.thenational.ae/world/central-asia/voices-on-afghanistan-youth-are-being-left-out-of-the-national-debate#ixzz30rljqtCe>

<sup>4</sup> Hewad Gran and Casey Johnson. *A Rough Guide to Afghan Youth Politics*. United States Institute of Peace. Special Report. 2014.

(<http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/SR344-A-Rough-Guide-to-Afghan-Youth-Politics.pdf>).

### **About The Liaison Office**

The Liaison Office (TLO) is an independent Afghan non-governmental organization founded in 2003 seeking to improve local governance, stability and security through systematic and institutionalized engagement with customary structures, local communities, and civil society groups. TLO's mission is *to facilitate the formal integration of communities and their traditional governance structures within Afghanistan's newly emerging peace, governance and reconstruction framework.*

TLO's main areas of activity—based on a conflict-sensitive/Do No Harm Approach—are research/analysis; dialogue facilitation and participatory peacebuilding; access to justice; and livelihoods.