

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



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Social Cohesion in Afghanistan: Challenges and opportunities

Afghanistan has witnessed major changes in the distribution of income in recent years. During the last one and half decade, it has enjoyed a relatively revival in its economic opportunities, after more than two decades of war in the country. Why social cohesion matters for Afghanistan

Economic and social transformations during a specific period lead to growth and bring new stresses and challenges with which governments have to consider well-tailored policies to cope. The challenges encompass inequalities, structural transformations and the requirement to address citizens rising expectations for standards of living and access to opportunities and managing public anger in terms of unequal distribution of resources.

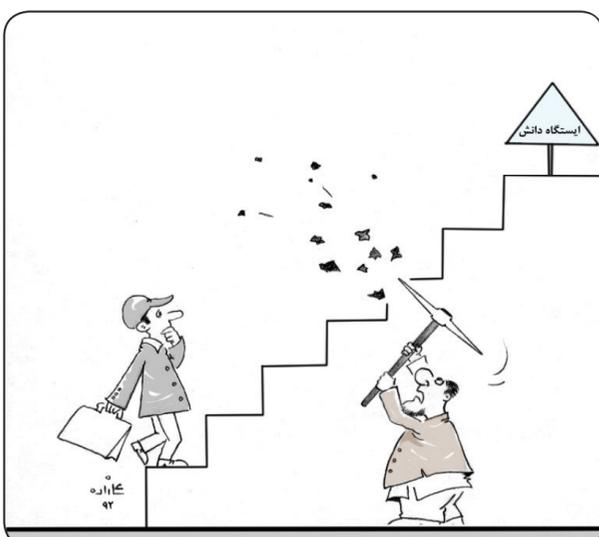
Rising inequality within regions and some ethnic groups has excluded disadvantaged populations from the advantages of the development process and opportunities in Afghanistan. In many cases, these risings within-country inequalities are driven by the increase in the share of top incomes in specific areas that development budget and projects have been allocated to them based on an unfair distribution policy. Growing dissatisfaction of the ethnic groups from the economic policies of the government show that they do not trust the government sharing the economic opportunities equally between them. As a result, such approaches have led to further social conflict instead of social harmony here. When the expectations of the people are not met, it usually undermines the support of the citizens for government reforms and increases social tensions, potentially threatening the stability of the development process. In the context of conflict prone countries, including Afghanistan, social tensions can lead to conflict.

Social cohesion does not happen in vacuum. While different groups of people do not benefit from the economic policies of the government, it indicates that government policy frameworks have been applied in disregard of people's desire for inclusive political processes. According to social scholars, development direction in which social inequalities are large, exclusion is widespread, and the scope for voicing dissent small would likely to be flawed. Social cohesion for conflict prone countries is one of the most policy objectives in order to build social trust among different social groups in the concerned society.

Articulating social cohesion
Social cohesion can act as a broad-based framework to mobilize people around a specific goal. This framework enables the government to build inclusive policy agenda and bring together different policy areas that are otherwise treated separately. These policy areas can create synergy and increase the level of efficiency of government performance to the eye of the different social groups if implemented based on equal distribution of economic opportunities among the people. According to the polls, policies in these areas all interact to have an effect on social outcomes, and one policy area needs to be designed with a regard to the others. In this regard, policies are a fundamental social cohesion mechanism which lead to development.

Afghanistan faces specific challenges to building social cohesion. Past development models have failed to generate opportunities and inclusive growth in the country. The main cause of such failures in Afghanistan is pursuing exclusive policies in the country. Debate of social cohesion in Afghanistan requires tackling both pre-existing challenges as well as new challenges emerging from the structural transformation that have taken place over the last one and half decade. Among the long-standing challenges faced by Afghanistan, the large number of poor under poverty line and their persisting vulnerability are the issues that need to be addressed urgently.

Any social cohesion policy should address issues of inequality beyond poverty, including issues of governance. In this regard, social harmony only can be ensured not people are economically treated equally but they should be politically treated equally as well. In other words, they shall have equal access to different levels of public administration. Historical patterns of economic and political distribution of resources and opportunities show that Afghanistan requires structural transformations to achieve social cohesion. Ensuring social cohesion requires to changing our exclusive mindsets to inclusive ones: Applying policies to include all the citizens and providing them the opportunities and resources equally. Inclusive policies enable all the citizens to support the government agenda and feel ownership on government policies.



Learning Mechanisms for Poverty Alleviation from China (Part 1)

By Hujjatullah Zia

Although Afghanistan is rich in mineral resources, poverty is one of the great issues challenging Afghan people. The withdrawal of many NGOs from the country after the US-led NATO's military mission ended in 2014, the economic constraints and unemployment were multiplied in Afghanistan. As a result of unmitigated economic problems and unemployment, a large number of Afghan manpower flocked to foreign countries since there were no effective mechanism from the government to alleviate poverty. The question is that what mechanism should Afghan government adopt to overcome the economic plight?

To know the answer, one needs to view the China's long-term poverty alleviation plan which has been highly fruitful for this country and more than 68 million people were lifted out of poverty only within the past five years. In China not only provinces but also cities, villages and counties are geared toward poverty alleviation and rural development is moving rapidly. One's jaw will drop while visiting the farthest province of China with all those tall infrastructures, mammoth enterprises, high technologies and indescribable facilities.

On my three-day visit from four cities of China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, along with Asian journalists, I was amazed at the constructions and development and the way Chinese officials seek to lift people out of poverty. They have built or facilitated traders to build colossal manufacturing companies, tourist cities, pilot zone and economic belt, giant airports, regional hub for international shipping and logistics, and strategic pivot on the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road.

In China, Guangxi is third among provincial level regions in the number of people living in poverty, although it had lifted 8.09 million people out of poverty from 2013 to 2017, as Chinese deputy secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Guangxi committee Sun Dawei said. "To realize our goal of totally lifting our people out of poverty in the next three years, we have to lift at least one million people out of poverty each year," said Sun in his meeting with 45 journalists from some 40 media organizations.

Sun said that Guangxi was ranked among the first seven positions nationwide over the last two years. "In 2017, Guangxi was at fourth place. We are among one of the eight best provinces and regions that have done good job in terms of poverty alleviation," he added. According to him, Guangxi officials have full confidence to win the battle of poverty alleviation campaign and this province is con-

tinuously making economic and social progress. Further, he said China would build an important gateway connecting the Silk Road economic belt and 21st century maritime Silk Road and promote its trade with ASEAN countries through building international passage. Annually, every province of China is believed to attract millions of tourists for their unique characteristics and magnetism. The poverty alleviation campaign will be fulfilled in 2020 lifting all the Chinese out of poverty. To view the rapid development, rural rehabilitation and colossal constructions, alleviating poverty is no challenge for the Chinese government.

Such way of campaigning against poverty will be an eye-opener for Afghan government. It is a real pity to see that the resources remain untapped in Afghanistan despite the fact that millions of people suffer from poverty and hunger. According to popular belief, if the mineral resources of Afghanistan were exploited and utilized, the bulk of economic challenges would be resolved. They have to be excavated and utilized, under close scrutiny, for constructions before being smuggled by corrupt individuals and militant groups.

Secondly, Afghanistan has many ancient monuments and rich museums but only a few tourists. To attract tourists and enhance the country's economy, the government will have to pay especial attention to those artifacts and monuments and put them on exhibition. A strong economy will also lead to a better security situation in the country.

Meanwhile, despite having large arable lands, the agriculture is not encouraged enough in Afghanistan and many villages are simply sandwiched between valleys and mountains with large unemployed population. Encouraging agriculture and creating job via this method is one the lessons can be learnt from our neighboring country China. That is, China creates job for rural residents in remote areas through facilitating agriculture. This way, even old men and women are employed in agricultural fields.

But if you travel only from Kabul to Kandahar, you will see thousands of kilometers of untapped lands. In case of not being arable, they can be used for many other purposes. It is rightly said that Afghanistan is a hungry man lying on gold. However, this country needs to get itself out of hunger through using this gold the same as a wise man.

To be continued...

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Talking about Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors; A Cultural and Social Taboo in Afghanistan (Part 1)

By Hamid Bamik

Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to analyze the cultural and social barriers that lead to ignorance of debating on sex sexual attitudes and behaviors among families and youths in Afghanistan. As per the latest survey of Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies on sexual attitudes and behaviors of Afghan youths, most Afghan teens and adolescents do not have information about the healthy sexual relationship. And, 90 percent of those interviewed in the survey said that there is a pressing need for sex education in Afghanistan. Although the new generation of Afghanistan, despite close and strict traditions, have been able to create occasions talking about various social and cultural topics to understand better their opposite sex's characteristics before entering an official relationship - marriage life, still talking about sexual attitudes and behaviors in public and families remains as a cultural and social taboo in Afghanistan.

Introduction

Recently, Afghan Institute for Strategic Studies published its latest survey entitled "Transition to Adulthood; Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors of Youth in Afghanistan." The survey has been conducted in a conversation with 1,350 people aged 15 to 34 in 10 largest provinces of Afghanistan. Sediqa Bakhtiar, one of the researchers, articulates that in the survey, the attitude and sexual behavior of youth and adolescents after childhood have been examined. This study echoes that most Afghan youths do not have information about the healthy sexual relationship. In this survey, 36% of the interviewees had no information about AIDS, and only 20% were familiar with safe and healthy relationships. And, 90 percent of those interviewed in this study said that there is a pressing need for sex education in Afghanistan.

The research shows that ignoring the debate on sexual issues has led Afghan young people to go to other sources for obtaining information about sexual matters that do not provide the right information to them. For example, according to this study, 60 percent of Afghan youths use sexy content such as movies and photos that address their sexual instinct. The researchers of this survey argue that using such objects for tackling the sexual needs can have personal and social damage. Its personal damage includes imitation of patterns of misconception, depression, and frustration, mental disorders, and addiction to such content and social damages are encouraging the youth toward committing rape, violence, street harassment and, in some cases, avoidance of marriage.

Studies project that widespread rape, honor killings, sexual violence, and child abuse in Afghanistan are the malicious results of lack of information and public awareness about sexual attitudes and behaviors. According to Ruhollah Amin, a psychologist in Afghanistan, talking about sexual needs and issues has a very negative connotation in Afghan society. He argues that even among couples, talking about sexual relationship is interpreted as bad, embarrassing, and heinous and should be kept secret. In his

opinion, this social and cultural censorship has become a self-censorship that causes disorders for a person, and finally, the consequences of such self-censorship rise in other ways that are inconsistent with the cultural and social norms of the society. For instance, jokes and poems that have sexual content and violence are indicative of such cultural censorship in the society. He emphasizes the need for a social and cultural campaign in Afghanistan regarding sexual attitudes and behaviors so that individuals can become aware of their sexual needs legally as a human.

Lack of Sex Education at Afghan Schools

Afghanistan is a traditional country and its people are religious who strongly believe in the traditional Islamic and religious principles. The contents and subjects of school curriculum in Afghanistan are also designed based on these Islamic principles and traditional values of the people. In 2016, the city of Kabul witnessed a public campaign that broke many of the taboos and traditions in the country. This campaign was specifically talking about sexual attitudes and behaviors of youths and the problems and inadequacies surrounding it in Afghanistan. Holding such public awareness programs are very pivotal and vital in this regard but not adequate. Because, first, such campaigns only take place out of schools by private organizations in Afghanistan. Second, these kinds of social and cultural public awareness programs occur in big cities of Afghanistan where far-reaching provinces are not witnessing such campaigns. Third, schools that are considered to be the main training centers for children don't have any clear and specific programs regarding educating the students about their sexual attitudes and behaviors, unfortunately.

Afghanistan's Human Rights Commission and Ministry of Women Affairs of Afghanistan's statistics echo that violence against women has increased in recent years. For example, Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission's 2017 annual report shows that violence against women in Afghanistan has increased by 8.6%. The report states that 5575 cases of violence have been registered this year. This figure was 5132 last year. Of the total recorded violence, more than 1,500 cases of physical violence, more than 360 cases of sexual violence, more than 1,800 verbal and psychological violence, more than 1,100 cases of economic violence and remaining violence have been reported in response to behaviors that are traditionally (social traditions) are disgraceful. In the reported physical violence section, more than 1,200 cases of beatings, 10 incidents, 57 injuries, 45 forced labor and 234 deaths were included. The Independent Human Rights Commission says that the statistics do not show the full reality due to the extent of this problem, and many cases of violence against women are likely to remain hidden for reasons of custom and lack of security.

To be continued...

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