

# Afghan People's Dialogue on Peace



People's Dialogue – Group Discussion in Western Afghanistan, October 2011

## Laying the Foundations for an Inclusive Peace Process

December 2011



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## I. Context: Laying the Foundations for an Inclusive Peace Process

The Afghan People's Dialogue on Peace [People's Dialogue] is an initiative in which ordinary Afghans can express their views through inclusive public discussions on the prospects for peace, reconciliation, security, economic development, human rights and the rule of law. Thirteen civil society organizations/networks<sup>1</sup> and the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission oversee and sponsor these public discussions to bridge what participants described as a *“gap between communities and the Government and international community”*.

The People's Dialogue aims to empower people by raising awareness among the Afghan population about peace and reconciliation processes, ensure that people's legitimate grievances, concerns and aspirations are heard, amplified and incorporated by policy-makers into all processes and plans for achieving sustainable peace in Afghanistan.

Supporting inclusivity in any future peace process, the People's Dialogue seeks to ensure broad participation of Afghans and inclusion of the widest possible spectrum of opinions. During October 2011, 78 focus groups discussions occurred in 31 provinces<sup>2</sup>, involving more than 1,500 Afghan men, women<sup>3</sup> and youth. Sessions involved Afghan men and women from different ethnic groups and all walks of life including public employees, farmers, business owners, representatives of civil society including women's organizations, unemployed persons, representatives of youth associations, persons with disabilities, members of ulema and women's shuras, religious scholars, tribal and community representatives, housewives, teachers, high school and university students, medical professionals, workers/labourers, civil society activists, journalists, victims of the conflict, artists and ex-combatants who joined the Afghanistan Peace and Reintegration Programme [APRP].

This report represents a summary of the key issues and concerns raised by the more than 1,500 Afghan men and women who participated in the People's Dialogue. Through this report Afghan civil society aims to carry the voices and views of Afghan people to the International Afghanistan Conference in Bonn, Germany [5 December 2011] in an effort to ensure that the views, concerns and desires of ordinary Afghans are heard and considered by decision-makers addressing critical issues linked to Afghanistan's future peace and stability at Bonn.

The views expressed in this document are solely those of Afghan men, women and youth who participated in the People's Dialogue.

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<sup>1</sup> A steering committee guides the work of the People's Dialogue; members include: Afghan Civil Society Forum [ASCF], Afghan Civil Society & Human Rights Network [ACSHRN], Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Afghan National Union of Labour [AMCA], Afghanistan Organization of Human Rights & Environmental Protection [AOHREP], Afghan Women's Network [AWN], Afghan Women Skills Development Center [AWSDC], Afghan Youth Social Cultural Organization [AYSCO], Civil Society Development Center [CSDC], Sanayee Development Organization [SDO], Transitional Justice Coordinating Group [TJCG], Armanshar Foundation, Women Political Participation Committee, 50% Campaign [WPPC]. Members of the Steering Committee used their offices in the regions/provinces and/or members of their networks to facilitate focus group discussions. The Human Rights Unit of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan [UNAMA] helped to facilitate these discussions and the work of the Steering Committee.

<sup>2</sup> Dialogues were held in: Bamyan, Baghlan, Badakhshan, Badghis, Daikundi, Faryab, Farah, Ghazni, Ghor, Herat, Jawzjan, Kabul, Kapisa, Kunduz, Kandahar, Khost, Kunar, Laghman, Logar, Mazar-e-Sharif, Nangahar, Nimroz, Nuristan [participants travelled to Jalalabad], Panjshir, Paktika, Paktiya, Sar-e-Pul, Samangan, Takhar, Uruzgan, Zabul.

<sup>3</sup> More than 500 women participated in dialogues/ discussions throughout the country.

## II. Key Principles for Achieving Peace

### ***Promoting An Inclusive Process: Involving Ordinary Afghans***

***“No one listens to the people, hears our voice”***

Throughout the country, Afghans welcomed the People's Dialogue initiative, stating that it represents the first time they have been asked for their opinions on peace, stability and the future of Afghanistan. A view often repeated was that people have not been adequately informed or involved in initiatives aimed at securing peace. A farmer from Uruzgan observed:

*“Thus far, the Government has not provided a mechanism to involve the population in the peace process and to garner their support.”*

Many people commented that civil society had been given little space to contribute to the peace process and that certain groups, particularly women and youth, were almost entirely excluded from this process. A student from Zabul province expressed the view echoed throughout the country:

*“The Government must change its behaviour and invite civilian communities in a consultation programme; they must plan any peace efforts according to the desire of civilians. [...] In general, every Afghan can play a vital role to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan but nobody cares about us and our ideas. Some people from outside are imposing ways to bring peace and stability even though they are not aware of the living conditions of the residents of remote villages.”*

In Logar province, participants agreed with the view expressed by a community member *“There is a big gap between the Government and people, our leaders do not want to be close to us; in this condition we cannot even think about peace.”* Many people expressed similar opinions throughout the country.

In nearly all discussions, men and women reiterated their desire to play a role in securing peace. In Nimroz province, for example, people said they are keen, as members of civil society, as youth, as teachers, or just as ordinary Afghan citizens, to play a role in establishment of peace in the country. As a teacher noted, *“The support of the community is a big power for the Government.”*

Some people specifically mentioned the 'Bonn conference' as an important event. In the western region, for example, several men and women noted that the first Bonn conference furthered the personal interests of warlords and those responsible for creating insecurity in Afghanistan. They stated that the second Bonn conference should take the views of the people, not the warlords, into consideration.

The view that *“Civil society is the bridge between the Government and the people”* resonated in discussions in all parts of the country.

*“We want civil society to sound our voices at the upcoming Bonn conference.”*

[Local resident Abkamari district, Badghis province]

### ***Promoting an Afghan-led Process and National Unity***

In many discussions, people were strongly of the opinion that the peace process must be Afghan-led. This was viewed as an indispensable pre-condition to involving the Taliban and other armed anti-Government groups in peace talks. Many people were also of the view that any process needs

to reflect Islamic principles and that a successful mediatory role can only be played by Muslim interlocutors.

In Kapisa province, community members called for support from the international community but also urged non-interference, stating *“Afghanistan is an independent country and this peace process should be led by Afghans”*. This statement reflected the dominant view throughout the country.

Given that any talks on peace are a discussion on the future of Afghanistan, many Afghan men and women said that Afghanistan needs to become more independent. In Logar province, for example, people reiterated that *“Afghanistan should be independent; we do not want the international community to control everything in our country”*.

The need for national unity and for any peace process to foster such unity was raised in a number of discussions:

*“If we want to see real peace we need unity; we cannot act as if we are looking at the interests of any one group.”*

[Female community member, Khost province]

In some areas the issue of national unity was linked to minority rights. Farmers, shopkeepers and female shura members in Daikundi province expressed or agreed with the view that any peace process, including talks/negotiations with armed opposition groups, should be in the interests of all ethnic groups in Afghanistan.

Similarly, teachers and representatives of a youth organization in Nimroz province said *“Minority rights have been the first victim of war during the past 30 years; we should give special attention to this issue. It is important for many people in Afghanistan.”*

### **III. Components of Durable Peace**

In all 78 discussions, held in all parts of Afghanistan, Afghan men and women engaged in discussions on what they viewed as the critical components for lasting peace. They cited: the deteriorating security situation, lack of justice and rule of law, lack of economic development, rampant corruption among Government officials and law enforcement authorities, low quality of services such as education and health, wide-spread unemployment, limited protection of and respect for human rights and women's rights, discrimination, together with interference of foreign countries in Afghan internal affairs particularly neighbouring countries, as the main drivers of prolonged conflict and instability in Afghanistan. People stated strongly that the Government needs to focus on addressing these factors as the solutions could form the main components of a durable peace.

A housewife from Kandahar summed up the general sentiments raised in nearly all discussions:

*“Peace doesn't mean killing innocent people and misusing the resources of the country. Peace means working hand in hand – all people working together, women with women, ...Pakistan working with Afghanistan, international and national, brother and sister, and building our country and trying hard to improve our education, economy and health.”*

People focused on what they deemed to be the root causes of the conflict. Plans to address these root causes could also form a blue print or goals for a future peace process. As a teacher from Kabul noted:

*“War in Afghanistan is like a chronic disease; if a doctor does not know the diagnosis of the sickness then it will be difficult to treat the disease. First we need to know the reason and the roots of war only then we can find the solution; only then peace will come.”*

The four components or pillars of a durable peace articulated by all Afghan men, women and youth involved in the People's Dialogue are detailed below and include: establishing security; addressing corruption, injustice and lack of rule of law; realising economic progress and social justice; and, promoting and protecting human rights, including women's rights.

### **1) Establishing Security**

*“The entire world has come to Afghanistan, but they could not bring security”*

[Journalist, Gardez]

Nearly all Afghan men and women – in all parts of the country – who shared their views in the People's Dialogue, expressed or agreed with the view that since 2005 the security situation in Afghanistan has steadily declined. The current situation is dire and deteriorating daily. Women in Kandahar said that when people go out, *“They are not sure if they will return alive.”* In many regions people said the security situation had worsened with only limited Government control over central districts.

A number of people, from different parts of the country, gave the example of the killing of former President and chair of the High Peace Council, Burhanuddin Rabbani, at his home, on international peace day, as a clear indicator of how badly the security situation had deteriorated. Many people asserted that if someone of his stature could not be protected, then the Government's ability to protect ordinary people was extremely bleak.

During many discussions Afghans reiterated that they felt caught between insurgents who target civilians and execute and abduct people, and the international military and Afghan security forces who use methods based on faulty intelligence, that disrespect Afghan culture and religion, and the safety of civilians [such as air strikes, night raids, large-scale arrests and arbitrary detentions.] Many Afghans also said that the insurgency would continue as long as ordinary people felt insecure and threatened by the military forces.

People called on the international military forces to cease night raids and practices such as arbitrary detention. Throughout the country Afghans voiced strong opinions that these methods fueled the conflict and led to increased insecurity.

People also unanimously called on armed opposition groups to stop targeting civilians, residential areas, religious places and hospitals. The view of men and women who took part in a discussion in Baghlan province was echoed during discussions in all parts of the country:

*“Our expectation from the armed opposition is to not harm civilians during the armed conflict and respect the laws of war. In addition to this, we are expecting the armed opposition – if they are really Afghans – to not receive orders from out of the country and to reach an agreement with Afghan Government on establishment of peace. They should lay down their weapons and contribute in the reconstruction of their own destroyed country.”*

Afghan men and women throughout the country strongly emphasised the role that neighbouring countries – mainly Pakistan but also Iran – have played in contributing directly to the conflict. They agreed that the international community should do more to stop neighbouring countries from

interfering in Afghanistan and push Pakistan to stop providing safe havens and support to insurgents. As an elder in Farah province asked, *"How is it possible that 40 States working in Afghanistan cannot control the actions of one State?"* During many discussions it was suggested that the international community should put more pressure on Pakistan and specifically on Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence [ISI] to stop their interference in Afghanistan.

Men and women also spoke of the different agendas at play in Afghanistan – with no one clear vision for peace and stability and economic development which was urgently needed. As a female teacher in Khost stated:

*"There is no one strategy for Afghanistan; only different countries, different ideas, different agendas. We need one plan, one set of goals."*

Repeatedly Afghans expressed the view that the Government and international community should work together to minimise the gap between them and ordinary people. People said this would help to bring peace and discourage civilians from joining the insurgency.

### ***Developing security structures and national capacity***

Almost all Afghan men and women involved in the People's Dialogue viewed the development of an effective, efficient and unified Afghan national security apparatus as a desirable goal that is critical to future prospects for peace, security, and economic prosperity. Government inability to develop security capacity was almost universally attributed to corruption, ineffective leadership [linked to corruption or lack of education and literacy from top to bottom within security agencies].

Security was not always attributed to the effectiveness of State institutions. For example, during discussions in the southeast region it was highlighted that the security situation in 2001 was comparatively good, despite the fact that the Afghan National Police [ANP] and Afghan National Army [ANA] were very weak at that time. People said that the current situation was much worse.

People agreed, however, that strong national security capacity is a key component for improving security and securing peace. In some areas, for example in Uruzgan, slight improvements in security were noted; this is attributed to *"a change in security leadership,"* highlighting that an individual at the helm of any security agency could influence the level of security/rule of law in an area. People repeatedly stated that corrupt leadership is one of the main causes of weak security agencies and, consequently, insecurity and the lack of rule of law.

On the issue of international presence, many people were of the firm view that the current conflict will only come to an end with the withdrawal of international military forces. In spite of such concerns, particularly in those parts of the country where fighting between international forces and insurgents is heaviest, doubts remained about the capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces [ANSF] to ensure security and stability. A number of participants said the international community should focus more on training the ANSF.

Differing opinions were conveyed about the possibility of international military forces leaving Afghanistan in 2014. Not all people who shared their views in the People's Dialogue agreed that the international community should remain in Afghanistan until a sustainable peace is reached, views on this issue diverged. While many participants requested that the international military leave, some were pessimistic about the possible consequences. An employee of the education department in Nuristan province stated, *"The most important element preventing peace is the presence of the international forces and international community. I also say that if they leave there will be a civil war"*. Similar views were expressed throughout the country.

## **2) Need to Tackle Corruption, Injustice and Lack of Rule of law**

*Lack of rule of law is the “cancer of Afghan society”*

[Shura member, Kunduz province]

Lack of justice, rule of law and corruption – particularly among law enforcement authorities was a burning issue raised in all discussions throughout the country. Afghan men and women almost universally acknowledged that widespread corruption at all levels of Government is a factor contributing to the deterioration of the security situation. Corruption, particularly within the leadership of the ANSF, was viewed as one of the main challenges to securing peace.

Country-wide, people said that corrupt officials squandered a massive proportion of international aid, placing their own interests above the interests of the community/country. People stated that much of the international assistance provided to Afghanistan has failed to produce its intended effect of boosting security, prosperity and service provision. Many Afghans said that justice was a building block for peace and noted that if there is justice, *“other components of peace will come”*. The view of an elder from Nimroz province was expressed by people involved in the People's Dialogue throughout Afghanistan:

*“Justice is the first and most important factor in any community, so if we want to have peace in our country we should have justice.”*

In the west of the country people stressed that widespread corruption at all levels of Government has exacerbated poverty. Men and women said that corruption is one of the key impediments to effective governance, security, development and political stability of Afghanistan. A resident of Abkamari district, Badghis, articulated the view conveyed throughout the country:

*“We are really tired about the situation of this country, everyone is corrupt and there is no justice for people. A killer may walk freely in the bazaar and the victims remain powerless. We cannot do anything. Women get killed by the decisions of the local community courts and there is no attention of the Government to the issue.”*

In Badakhshan province, a province with many isolated districts, people said that in several districts there are no courts or lawyers. They have to rely on traditional dispute resolution mechanisms to settle disputes. Concerns over the high level of corruption affecting law enforcement and judicial authorities were expressed by many people and can be summarised by the view of a female legal aid provider from Baghlan:

*“The law enforcement departments [police, prosecutor's office and courts] are the most corrupt organs within the current Government administration. One of the reasons why people still hold the traditional dispute resolution mechanism is the existence of widespread corruption within the legal and judicial system in Afghanistan.”*

In the south, complaints about the lack of rule of law in Afghanistan were widespread; some related this problem closely to the conflict, stating, *“The judicial system is very corrupt and the law is not implemented. These things cause the ordinary people, especially those in living in the districts, to prefer referring their cases to Taliban justice.”*

A female returnee in Bamyán province said *“Implementation of law depends on corruption and bribery”*. Her view that laws were not implemented by law enforcement agencies but rather violated

by them was echoed throughout the country. People stated that unless a person paid bribes or had a powerful supporter they would not receive any form of justice.

Lack of respect for laws and impunity of the powerful was also reiterated in many discussions. Men and women all over the country said that laws merely exist on paper and complained that known criminals and warlords still enjoy political support at the central and local levels. This situation negatively impacted Afghans' trust in their Government – again this was viewed as a contributing factor to the ever widening gap between society and the Afghan Government. As conveyed by community members in Panjshir province:

*“In Afghanistan there is a deep gap between people and the Government. The Government is apathetic and does not want to deal with people's difficulties; if our leaders do not pay attention to the people then people will not respect the law.”*

They agreed that “even our law makers are law breakers” and said “we want a sober Islamic Government.”

The existence of corruption and nepotism was a reoccurring issue. The words of a farmer from Achin district, Nangarhar province, and a water department worker from Badghis province express general sentiments:

*“A person must pay in order to get a job with a decent salary. All the positions in the Government are sold. People do not get hired because of merit.”*

[Farmer, Nangarhar province]

*“People are bitter when the best jobs go to unqualified people for reasons of corruption and ties, not because of qualifications; this creates discontent, destabilises the Government and fuels corruption. Corruption is the root cause of poor governance, these people do not respect the elders, they do not respect the law.”*

[Water department worker, Badghis province]

In a number of provinces, people stressed that the upcoming Bonn conference should focus on fighting corruption, particularly within law enforcement and judicial authorities, as a way to support positive changes in Afghan society. As an employee of a money-exchange shop in Jalalabad emphasised:

*“If the Bonn conference is like the last Bonn conference, we do not want it! All the misfortunes of Afghanistan have come from there. [...] If corruption is not eliminated and the rule of law is not implemented, there will not be peace.”*

### **3) Realising Economic Progress and Social Justice**

Many Afghans stressed the connection between peace, security and development – stating that if the economy is good it can support peace and that improved security will strengthen economic progress. People all over the country emphasised that realising equitable economic progress is one of the main requirements for achieving sustainable peace in Afghanistan. Poverty, slow and unequal geographic development, mass unemployment, inequality in the allocation of resources, and widespread corruption that impacts service delivery were problems the Government has failed to address over the last ten years. The majority of people held the view that lasting peace would not be achieved if the economic situation of ordinary Afghans did not improve substantially. As a teacher from Takhar put it “*Inequality itself is reason of instability*”.

A recently reintegrated former Talib from Balkh province articulated the link between development and security:

*"I had been Talib for around two years but without any support of Pakistan, I have been living through the support of local residents. Recently when I understood Pakistan's interventions into Afghanistan's affairs, particularly their orders to Taliban to target elders I decided to join the Government side. My area does not have electricity, water, or health clinic and I hope the Government helps us and builds the required facilities and pays attention on my people."*

Some people, particularly in secure areas, acknowledged progress in the form of schools, roads and hospitals being built all over the country. A female teacher from Faryab province noted:

*"The three-decade war destroyed all infrastructure in Afghanistan, but fortunately after the fall of the Taliban regime, Afghans established a government, which the United Nations supported to reestablish all the social, political, economic systems in Afghanistan. So far we have witnessed development in every field. For instance, the establishment of a central Government, the new modern constitution, the creation of the Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army and equipping them with modern military equipment and providing them with training are some major achievements. In addition, thousands of bridges, roads, medical clinics and schools have been built in Afghanistan. In the field of communication, today we have different mobile companies and internet is available in almost every city of Afghanistan. Freedom of speech is another major achievement in Afghanistan... [it] resulted in the establishment of private television and radio stations, which help Afghan communities to exercise their right to information."*

A majority of participants stated that despite some clear improvements, these achievements have not been equal to the billions of dollars in donor aid that has been spent in the last ten years. Men and women all over the country stressed that progress should not be measured in terms of the quantity of services, such as the number of schools and hospitals built, but should also be based on the quality of these critical services, which many people said was far from satisfactory.

People from Takhar noted that during the past ten past years many schools, hospitals and health clinics have been built, however, access to education and healthcare was jeopardised by the lack of professional teachers and doctors. Similarly, in Bamyan province [Bamyan centre] people said they only have one hospital, which lacks professional doctors and medicines, impacting the quality of service they can access.

During many discussions, a divide between urban and rural development was also raised. Participants held the view that access to essential services is limited, especially in rural areas, as the development of urban areas or provincial capitals had been prioritised. Many people said that as a result the Government had not done enough to improve their living conditions. A nurse from Baghlan province expressed a view raised during discussions in all parts of the country:

*"The Government needs to provide health service equally to all Afghan people. In many villages of Afghanistan, people do not have access to basic health service and many children and mothers lose their life."*

In some areas, for example, Nuristan, people stated that local insecurity, coupled with limited Government control, has meant that development projects have not been implemented and access to services for Nuristan's inhabitants was seriously compromised. People stated strongly that such a situation not only affects the enjoyment of basic rights, but creates dissatisfaction, increasing the

distance between the local population and the Government, and facilitating recruitment by insurgents.

A religious scholar described the situation in Nuristan province:

*“There is no improvement in Nuristan. There are no roads, no electricity, no education, and no health facilities. There is no rule of law. There is no education and 99 per cent of the people are illiterate.”*

A high school teacher in Nuristan added *“Insurgents have brainwashed our children and teach them that fighting in Afghanistan is correct”*.

Similarly, in Uruzgan province people despaired of the conditions in which they live, such as the lack of a markets for buying and selling local products due to poor roads connecting the districts, unavailability of adequate health care, and the weak education system, including the poor capacity of teachers. People lamented that such conditions have further distanced the people from the Government. Such views were echoed all over the country, but particularly in conflict-affected areas where Government authority and control is limited.

Some people noted that the Government had not distributed development assistance equally to all parts of the country and attributed that imbalance to ethnic preferences. Community members in Bamyan were particularly sensitive to this discrepancy. One Bamyan resident said that a huge amount of money is spent on developments in insecure provinces where insurgent groups destroy them, *“while in Bamyan, which has good security, no work is done. Because of this ethnic issue Bamyan people are isolated.”*

During a number of discussions people spoke of the need for “balanced development”.

Men and women in some group discussions said that the central and local governments are generally considered as ineffective and disconnected from the real needs of the people. Many stated that corruption, nepotism within institutions and warlordism in some parts of the country undermined the authority of institutions and thwarted economic development. All over the country, people consistently voiced anger at the level of corruption which denies them critical infrastructure and services. As a clerk from Beshud district, Nangarhar province, highlighted:

*“We need security, education and quality services. Agriculture should be developed. The amount of money that the Government earmarks for a district is not given to each family but it is taken by local authorities and transferred to maliks [local leaders] who put it in their pockets.”*

Corruption among public officials was stated as the main reason for the lack of progress and the poverty of many Afghans. An elder from Pul-i-Khumri articulated the view expressed by many:

*“Despite the billions of dollars of financial assistance that Afghanistan has received in the past ten years, still 75 percent of the Afghan population lives below the poverty line and no significant change is visible in their life. On the contrary, a specific number of Afghans who are working or have worked as high ranking officials in the Afghan Government, warlords, and drug smugglers are the owner of the luxury cars and buildings in Afghanistan or abroad.”*

People all over the country called on the Government to undertake measures to fight corruption and punish those who have benefitted from it. They also stated that the international community should ensure that donated funds are not misused by corrupt Government officials. Country-wide, Afghans

involved in the People's Dialogue affirmed that if the economic situation of ordinary people does not improve there can be no lasting peace in the country.

#### **4) Protecting and Promoting Human Rights**

The promotion and protection of all human rights, including women's rights, and the elimination of discrimination and violence against women were repeatedly mentioned as a critical component necessary for the establishment of a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. Many people also emphasised the rights of ethnic minorities. Afghans repeatedly referred to the need to respect, protect and promote human rights for all citizens – in particular, the right to education, adequate healthcare, employment, and the right to personal security.

In general, there was a consensus, throughout the country, that improvements have been made in the realisation of human rights, particularly for women, and that people have grown more aware of their rights. At the same time, people spoke of the numerous challenges and obstacles that prevent ordinary people from accessing their rights, such as lack of rule of law and access to justice [see section on rule of law and justice].

Some people, for example in Nimroz province, stated -- given their importance and the fact that they are flouted throughout the country -- women's rights need to be a distinct priority. Men and women all over the country acknowledged that women's rights are not respected and protected enough. An ulema shura member from Kunar province expressed the view of most people involved in the People's Dialogue:

*"It is necessary to think more about the rights of women. There is a need to implement domestic laws that recognise that men and women have the same rights before the law. The Government should ensure the right to work for both."*

Similarly a female lawyer from Baghlan province expressed a view common to many participants:

*"All Afghan citizens including women should be equally treated by their Government and they should be able to enjoy from their citizenship rights individually, not based on their gender, tribe or ethnic group; women should not be considered as second level citizens, and their appearance in social or political affairs should not be symbolic or based on their gender; they should be empowered in all aspects of their life, and all human rights standards must be respected by our law enforcement authorities."*

During discussions it was apparent that a number of Afghans were unaware of what human rights mean for themselves or their community. Many people spoke of the need to ensure equal rights for Afghans regardless of their ethnic group, gender, or geographical location and affirmed the compatibility of universal human rights with the basic tenets of Islam.

Others, however, stated that human rights are a foreign import and a "tool of imperialism" contradictory to traditional cultural practices. A number of people spoke of the need for further awareness-raising initiatives that should be targeted towards ordinary people and influential community-members, particularly in remote and isolated areas.

Nearly all people taking part in the People's Dialogue expressed a desire for some sort of justice and/or accountability to bring an end to over three decades of conflict. A small yet vocal minority of participants, however, stated their fears that investigation, prosecution and punishment of past

crimes would result in further instability and prolong the conflict. The view of a community member from Farah province expresses such views:

*“When we start to implement justice for the past crimes, we won’t reach peace; we will dig and find discrimination. There should be unity. We can’t dig the crimes from the past; this will make the situation worse.”*

There was a general consensus, however, that impunity for those who have committed serious crimes, such as crimes against humanity and gross violations of human rights should not occur. In the northeast of the country, for example, most people referred to the need for social justice and stated there should be no impunity for those that committed serious human rights violations throughout Afghanistan’s turbulent past. In Logar province people emphasised that *“All war lords should be punished.”* Similar views featured in discussions throughout Afghanistan.

#### **IV. How to Achieve Peace and Reconciliation**

##### ***Need to Involve Insurgents and the Taliban in Peace-Building***

Although many people involved in the People’s Dialogue expressed scepticism about the possible success of any peace process, the general expectation is that the Government should work towards ending the conflict and establishing a durable peace. In addition to critical components such as security, rule of law and justice, economic prosperity and development, and the protection and promotion of human rights, the predominant opinion of the more than 1,500 people involved in the Dialogue is that it is imperative to involve insurgents, including the Taliban, in peace-building initiatives. Many also said that some members of the Taliban should be invited to the Bonn Conference.

The following statements reflect the views expressed in most discussions:

*“The Government should talk to insurgents and have their opinion to stop the war in Afghanistan. We prefer to have representatives from the insurgents’ side as well alongside the Afghan Government, because this will be the only chance to talk frankly for peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan”.*

[Community member, Kunduz province]

*“National reconciliation is the means to a just and sustainable peace in Afghanistan. I expect the Government of Afghanistan to establish a lawful government, which functions transparently and with accountability to the people. The Government should eradicate corruption and violations of the laws from the system. I expect the insurgents, as Muslims, to join the peace and reconciliation processes in Afghanistan.”*

[Female civil society representative, Faryab province]

While people stated that the Government should take all necessary measures to achieve peace, so long as such measures are based on the interests of all of Afghanistan’s ethnic groups, they also said that any talks with groups, such as the Taliban, should protect the achievements of the last decade, such as progress in the protection of women’s rights.

A number of men and women stated that insurgents are not in a position to negotiate with the Government – they stressed support for the President’s policy of ‘talking to Pakistan’ as a means of talking to the Taliban.

***Need to Involve Ordinary Afghan People in Peace Processes***

All over the country, people said that the Government needs the support of the Afghan people to achieve meaningful and durable peace; solidarity and mutual cooperation between the Government and people of Afghanistan was required.

Men, women and youth from all walks of life expressed their support and commitment to work for peace. Journalists in the southeast spoke of the role they can play in raising awareness. A female poet/writer said she wants to *“incorporate the theme of peace in my satires, poems and short stories in order to encourage people to understand the benefit of peace and sadness of war.”*

Youth and teachers similarly said they could raise issues in classrooms across the country. As articulated by a student from Kunduz province:

*“Educated people especially students of the universities are the backbone of our community. We are ready to participate and serve in all aspects of the life and development of our country, not only peace and security. We are the ones who will make the future of Afghanistan.”*

University students from Asadabad, Kunar province, also called on youth:

*“To raise awareness in schools and universities and invite others to join the peace process in order not to waste the achievements of the last 10 years. Youth can raise their voices against the weak governance and the lack of rule of law to ensure human rights for all. There must be working opportunities for all, especially for those who are extremely poor, in order to avoid them joining the insurgency.”*

Many people identified religious leaders as a catalyst for peace. A male social worker from Paktika explained, *“Our society is a traditional and religious society. We listen better to the words of Ulema. If they talk about peace it is more effective.”*

Religious leaders and elders also expressed their readiness to contribute actively to the peace process and build bridges between the various sectors of society, to reach out to insurgents, as well as educate people on the meaning of peace. A mullah from Pul-i-Khumri stated:

*“They [religious leaders] can easily change the situation by encouraging people to contribute in peace process and by using their influence they can advise their followers, in particular those who are in conflict, to stop their disputes and forgive each other, and this way we can reach our national unity at the country level.”*

During some discussions in the south, a number of men said that only the international community was in a position to secure peace. This view was not common throughout the country.

In other areas people said that they were ready and willing to assist in peace negotiations, but noted that supporting peace had been a risky enterprise in the past. A tribal elder from Dangam district, Kunar province, affirmed that his community was *“Ready to cooperate to strengthen peace but we need the support of the Government. We can talk to the Taliban but the Government and international military forces do not want us to. We tried it before and some tribal elders were arrested. The Government will arrest us right after we invite the Taliban for peace.”*

A number of people spoke of the important role that religious leaders, community leaders, elders and others could play in peace initiatives but noted that the Government has given them neither the authority to engage with the insurgents nor the protection they need from insurgents' threats of assassination.

Throughout the country people were of the opinion that the Government could only achieve peace by actively engaging with and involving the people in the process.

***Need to Involve Women in Peace Processes and Protect Women's Rights***

Afghan women stated they are paying the highest price in the ongoing conflict, as together with children, they represent the most vulnerable group. Women were of the opinion there would be no sustainable peace if they were not actively involved in all aspects of the peace process. A teacher from Jalalabad called for the increased participation of women in public life as a possible way to pursue peace:

*“When females are educated and become part of the Provincial Council, Wolesi Jirga, Meshrano Jirga, or even as employees of the Government, they can work to promote the peace process.”*

Many men and women agreed that women could offer an important contribution to the peace process. The head of a disability rights organization in Mehtarlam, Laghman province shared her view, which was reflected in a number of discussions elsewhere:

*“In Pashtoon culture, the participation of women in all matters is accepted and helpful particularly when two rival groups fight each other. Women intervene and both parties immediately agree to a ceasefire. Afghan women have a history of brave performances in war.”*

A number of women also expressed their willingness to contribute to the process of promoting peace within their families. A female teacher from Kunar said,

*“If women are more aware of the process and take part in peace campaigns, they can convince their children, husbands, and other members of their families to leave/not support the insurgency and engage in activities to promote peace.”*

A female student from Faizabad, Badakshan province stressed that women in general, but educated young women in particular, could contribute to the peace process by advocating for the inclusion of women in the public and social sphere, women's political participation, as well as by educating their own families on the concept of peace.

A female member of the Afghan Youth Society from Jalalabad province added *“Each of us should work hard for national unity and share a message of peace. If each of us pass this message on to at least one person and ask him or her to do the same, we will reach a lot of people”*. Participants expressed similar views in numerous discussions throughout the country.

Many women underlined the importance of Taliban involvement in negotiations as part of a sustainable solution, but strongly asserted that negotiations and inclusion of insurgents in the peace process should not affect their rights and the gains made in recent years. Men and women alike expressed concerns that women's rights would become a casualty of peace. As a female poet from Kandahar stated:

*“The Taliban should be part of the Bonn conference but it must be ensured that education for women will be highly supported. It is important that women and all the citizens of Afghanistan have their rights to education, work, freedom of speech and other civil and political rights protected under national and international laws.”*

All over the country men and women said that no compromise should be made with insurgents on issues related to the rights of women – women's rights to education should be protected; women should be allowed to work, to go out in public and have freedom of movement.

***Qualities of Peace-Makers: Neutral, Honest, Independent, Knowledgeable about Peace, No Warlords***

Most men and women involved in the People's Dialogue discussions said that persons involved in the peace process should be neutral, honest, respectful, knowledgeable about peace, independent – not agents of foreign countries – influential in their areas of work and aware of local problems.

It was repeatedly stressed that those involved should be seen as legitimate representatives of communities and that they should respect the rule of law. Many stressed that focus should not only be at the Kabul level and that citizens from all provinces should be part of the process. Many Afghans also stated that women must have an equal role to men in building peace.

A number of people all over the country expressed strong opposition to the involvement of “warlords, criminals and corrupt Government officials” and those with “blood on their hands” and criticised the first conference on Afghanistan held in Bonn for involving warlords.

In the south, a number of men complained that those who are currently involved in the peace process have vested interests in the continuance of insecurity:

*“We need those people for whom peace is important to be involved in the peace process, not those who should be brought to justice, if peace comes. Presently those people involved in the peace process are those for whom insecurity is as important as water for a fish.”*

In Zabul province a focus group consisting of men and women said:

*“Those whose hands are red with the blood of innocent civilians, those who were criminals in the past, occupy higher positions in the Government such as ministers, senators, governors and high rank officers in the Government. The peace process should ensure that those personalities do not have any role in it.”*

As most people feel that Afghanistan's deteriorating security situation, political instability, poverty and lack of rule of law and justice is attributed to corruption, inefficiency and the ulterior motives of, “warlords, commanders and those corrupt individuals currently holding key leadership positions,” Afghans were of the firm view that to achieve lasting peace, the role of such people in the peace process must be limited. The views of one tribal elder/intellectual from Shindad district, Herat province captured the views articulated throughout the country:

*“Afghans believe that people with 30 years experience of killing, abusing and exploiting people to retain their power should NOT be involved in the peace process. Accountability focused upon those currently in power needs to be prioritised. Why do they have so much money? We do not have social justice in Afghanistan, look at these people and how much they've taken from ordinary Afghans.*

*I think if these people remain engaged with the current system of Afghanistan, we will never have peace because the people who built this system are the same people who created this current situation for Afghanistan. They can not lead the peace process for this country.”*

## **V. Conclusion and People's Recommendations**

The People's Dialogue aims to give voice to the views of ordinary Afghan men, women and youth and in so doing ensure that these voices are both heard and incorporated into all plans aimed at achieving sustainable peace in Afghanistan. As highlighted in this report, an inclusive process that listens to the views of the Afghan people and involves them in all processes that affect their lives will serve to empower people by giving them a stake in the future of their country. Yet many Afghans told the organizers of the People's Dialogue that the discussions of the Dialogue were the first time that they had ever been asked for their views or opinions on the issues that affect their lives the most: peace, security and the accountability of their Government to the people.

The notion of accountability and the desire of ordinary Afghans to bridge the gap that separates them from their Government was palpable. Many participants expressed the desire to be more involved on matters of peace and the fight against corruption. Men and women alike noted the need for greater unity, better protection for the rights and freedoms of all ethnicities and respect for the equality of men and women in society and in their ability to take part in society.

Participants expressed an eagerness for the international community to continue to play a constructive role in their society, supporting the peace process, the development of Afghanistan in urban and rural areas, demanding accountability for how the aid they provide is used and spent. They noted the international community had a key role in preventing the interference of Afghanistan's neighbours in matters of peace and in the drive to end the conflict.

Afghan men and women also noted the role they saw for civil society, the need for activists to speak out in favour of accountability, peace, and the protection of communities from discrimination, corruption and harm. The Dialogue was viewed as an initial step for civil society to reach out and consult more actively with the Afghan people on their views on the prospects for peace and the future direction of Afghan society.

The People's Dialogue offers the following recommendations in an effort to invigorate future discussions and amplify the voice and views of the Afghan people who recommend the following:

### **People's Recommendations**

To the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan:

- Promote an inclusive peace process: Ensure that mechanisms are in place to involve and obtain the views of ordinary Afghans, including women and youth, and that these views are incorporated into all plans for achieving sustainable peace and security in Afghanistan.
- Support Afghan civil society to bridge the gap between the Government and the people: Support civil society programmes aimed at raising awareness on issues related to peace and security – including human rights [women's rights, and the rights of ethnic minorities]; support programmes aimed at soliciting the views and opinions of ordinary Afghans and initiatives aimed at building civil society capacities.
- Protect civilians: To address insecurity, based on international humanitarian law, Afghan military forces should continue efforts to avoid and minimise civilian casualties, and take necessary steps to ensure all operations are more receptive to Afghan sensibilities and cultural values.

## Afghan People's Dialogue on Peace

- Accelerate efforts aimed at achieving peace - involve insurgents, including the Taliban, in peace-building efforts, ensuring that all efforts are based on the interests of all Afghan people – men, women and youth; ensure that any peace process is Afghan-led.
- Ensure that women in particular are represented in all forums and decision-making bodies established to promote and support durable peace in Afghanistan.
- Conduct a nation-wide project to identify the root causes and drivers of instability.
- Develop an integrated strategy and road map for securing peace in Afghanistan with clearly defined goals that has the commitment of all partners, and is focused on establishing security, economic development, rule of law, and justice and human rights as critical components of a durable peace.
- Develop targeted initiatives aimed at eliminating corruption which is a pervasive concern affecting security, economic development and individual opportunity. Target in particular justice and law enforcement institutions as an urgent priority, with focus on individual capacity building, institutional reform and removal of individuals who abuse their power or are found to be engaged in corrupt practices.
- Focus on law enforcement with emphasis on rural areas and districts, and special programmes aimed at enforcing legislation that protects and promotes women's rights.
- Prioritise capacity building of the Afghan National Security Forces and develop capacities of security forces and leadership, and hold leadership to account.
- Ensure 'balanced development' that focuses on rural and remote districts and includes all ethnic groups of Afghanistan. Target development focused on service delivery, including health and education, where aid effectiveness is measured in quality of service provision, not just quantity; focus on improving infrastructure in rural areas based on the needs of communities.
- Uphold human rights values in all negotiations and efforts aimed at achieving reconciliation and lasting peace, in particular ensure that gains made in human rights, particularly the rights of Afghan women and girls, are guaranteed and are not a 'casualty' of any peace efforts.
- Ensure there is no amnesty but justice for perpetrators of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and gross violations of human rights. The Government should ensure that any road map for peace and reconciliation includes ways to reveal the truth for all the different periods of conflict in Afghanistan, based on the needs and desires of Afghans, in particular victims of conflict.
- Ensure that all individuals involved in building peace are the legitimate representatives of all communities, include women and are neutral and independent individuals who have not been involved in any of Afghanistan's conflicts.

### To the International Community:

- Support the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan implement the recommendations highlighted above in order to bridge the gap between the Government, international community and the people.
- Support Afghan civil society to bridge the gap between the Government, international community and the people: Support civil society programmes aimed at raising

awareness on issues related to peace and security – including human rights [women's rights, and the rights of ethnic minorities]; support programmes aimed at soliciting the views and opinions of ordinary Afghans and initiatives aimed at building civil society capacities.

- Ensure that the voices of the Afghan people are heard and reflected in all decision making forums, including the Bonn Conference and that ordinary people are empowered and involved in peace processes.
- Protect civilians – in line with international humanitarian law, international military forces should take the necessary steps to cease night search operations and ensure all operations are more receptive to Afghan sensibilities and cultural values.
- Increase diplomatic efforts to ensure that neighbouring countries do not interfere in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, in particular push Pakistan to stop providing safe havens and support to insurgents.
- Ensure that all donor aid reaches intended beneficiaries; fund programmes focusing on rural and remote areas; ensure that aid does not have unintended consequences such as fueling conflicts or ethnic divides; measure aid effectiveness in terms of quality of service provision, not just quantity; focus on community-based development, based on the needs of the people; ensure, through appropriate mechanisms, that donated funds are not misused and that all those found to be misusing or appropriating funds face criminal sanction and are relieved of their posts.
- Support the Government in developing one clear vision/ road map to secure peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan that all members of the international community involved in Afghanistan, adhere to; there should not be competing interests or agendas.
- Monitor the all peace initiatives to ensure that gains made in human rights, including the rights of women are upheld – ensure that human rights are not the casualty of any initiatives aimed at achieving sustainable peace in Afghanistan; that the interests and needs of the people form the basis of any road map towards peace.
- Support the greater representation of women in all decision-making bodies established to promote and support durable peace in Afghanistan.
- Monitor the peace process to ensure that all individuals involved in building peace are the legitimate representatives of all communities, include women, and are neutral and independent individuals who have not been involved in any of Afghanistan's conflicts.
- Monitor the peace process to ensure that, in line with international standards, there is no amnesty for war crimes, crimes against humanity and gross violations of human rights.

To the Armed Opposition:

- Protect civilians – respect the laws of war, cease targeting civilians, residential areas, religious places, hospitals and schools, and end the campaign of assassinations.
- Enter into talks with the Government of Afghanistan aimed at achieving sustainable peace.
- Listen to and consider the concerns, grievances and aspirations of all of Afghanistan's people – all ethnic groups, men, women and youth.

- Respect the human rights of all Afghan's – particularly the universal right to education for boys and girls equally.

To Afghan Civil Society:

- Act as a bridge between the Government and the people – develop programmes aimed at raising awareness on issues related to peace and security – including human rights [women's rights, and the rights of ethnic minorities]; initiate programmes aimed at soliciting the views and opinions of ordinary Afghans and support initiatives aimed at building local capacities.
- Raise the voice of ordinary Afghans – ensure that the views of men, women and youth are regularly communicated and reflected in initiatives and forums aimed at achieving lasting peace in Afghanistan, including at the Bonn Conference; initiate country-wide discussions with people, with specific focus on rural and remote communities, women and youth.
- Advocate for the protection of civilians to ensure that all parties to the conflict adhere to international humanitarian law.
- Advocate for an end to the conflict and talks/negotiations with the armed opposition.
- Monitor all peace initiatives to ensure that gains made in human rights, including the rights of women are upheld and protected – ensure, through targeted advocacy interventions, that human rights are not the casualty of any initiatives aimed at achieving sustainable peace in Afghanistan; actively advocate for human rights-centered processes and ensure that the interests and needs of the people form the basis of any road map towards peace.
- Monitor the peace process and support advocacy initiatives to ensure that all individuals involved in building peace are the legitimate representatives of all communities, include women, and are neutral and independent individuals who have not been involved in any of Afghanistan's conflicts.
- Monitor the peace process and support advocacy initiatives to ensure that, in line with international standards, there is no amnesty for war crimes, crimes against humanity and gross violations of human rights.
- Support regional peace-building initiatives – initiate greater cooperation and advocacy efforts with civil society in the region to build an effective regional civil society network; solicit the views of ordinary people in the region on issues related to peace and stability and ensure an exchange of views whereby peoples' concerns, grievances and aspirations are communicated at a regional level.