An analysis of

Counterpart International's
efforts to increase
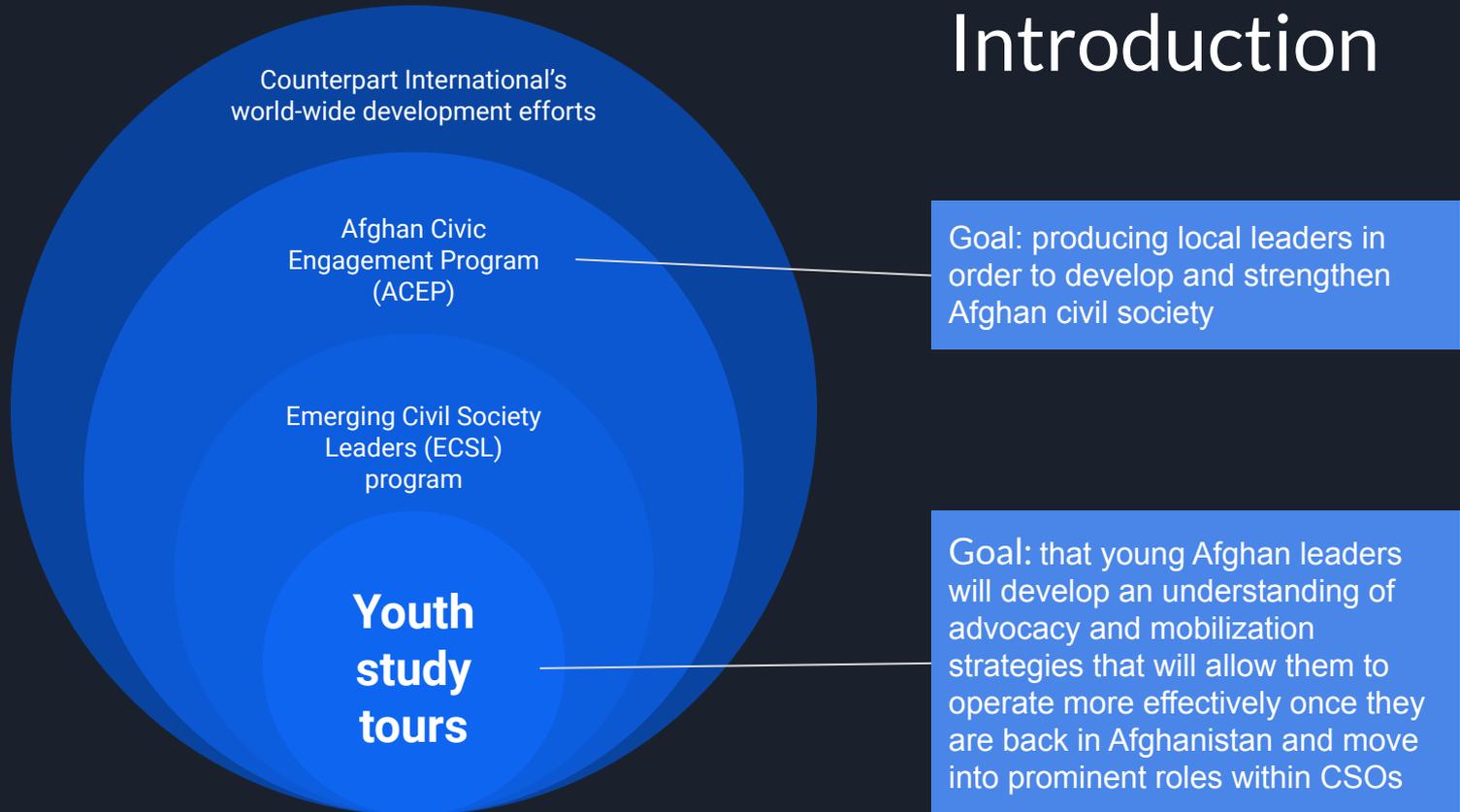# Youth Involvement in
Afghan Civil Society

International Studies Capstone
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Inclusive Social Accountability (ISA)

- The ISA developmental framework is the model developed by Counterpart for much of their work throughout the world
  - The focus within ISA is on accountability and participation
  - The goal of ISA is to "amplify the voices of those who have been purposefully excluded…" (Counterpart, 3)
- The ISA framework is made up of five major building blocks, of which Building Block 1 is critical to the following analysis of Counterpart's work in Afghanistan
- Building Block 1: Operationalize Local Knowledge
  - Key components of Building Block 1 include the identification of emerging leadership within excluded groups, power mapping, and giving a voice to marginalized groups so that they can be included in government decision making and in reforms
  - Much of Counterpart's work in Afghanistan has been geared toward these goals

Introduction

Counterpart International's
world-wide development efforts

Afghan Civic
Engagement Program
(ACEP)

Emerging Civil Society
Leaders (ECSL)
program

**Youth
study
tours**

Goal: producing local leaders in order to develop and strengthen Afghan civil society

Goal: that young Afghan leaders will develop an understanding of advocacy and mobilization strategies that will allow them to operate more effectively once they are back in Afghanistan and move into prominent roles within CSOs

Afghan Youth

Significance: **Almost ¾ of the population are below the age of 30**

Disenfranchisement

Very large youth cohort: ~8 million facing social and political disenfranchisement

Little education; few employment opportunities (31% unemployment rate); Lack of political voice; High illiteracy (54% are literate)

$+$

Post-conflict zone

Growing up amidst violence and uncertainty

-Afghanistan has had a long history of conflict and instability, including the Soviet invasion, communist government, Taliban rule, and transition to democracy

$+$

Frustration

At lack of opportunity and lack of political voice

-General frustration among youth and civil society leaders about their role in Afghan society, according to a focus group
-Culture and society prefer traditional gatherings of elders while excluding youth
-Youth branches of political parties manipulated to ensure they get the vote rather than promoting youth agenda

Extremist groups target youth

Because of vulnerability caused by this combination of factors

Efforts by Other Organizations

- Youth Empowerment Program
  - **Goal:** increase youth participation; establish a network of young people
  - **Form:** training, civic education, Youth Situational Assessment surveys, sponsored international travel
  - **Strength:** collaboration between youth, government institutions, and civil society organization
- United States Institute for Peace
  - **Goal:** challenge cultural norms and emphasis youth participation and female representation
  - **Form**: participatory theater
    - 72 performances; 25,000 women and young people reached in 24 districts
  - **Strengths**: worked with local partners
  - **Successes**: increased female political representation
- Afghanistan Young Leaders Initiative
  - **Form:** class discussion and summits
    - Operates in 16 Asia-Pacific countries, including Afghanistan
  - **Goal:** More focused on developing young leaders who will work in an *international* context
    - Also recruited primarily from people who were already in positions of leadership, such as business owners and the heads and/or founders of various organizations

Case Study: Emerging Civil Society Leaders' Youth Study Tours

- The ECSL program was made up of Nine international learning exchanges to countries such as Sri Lanka, India, Uzbekistan, and the United States as well as several internal tours to other Afghan provinces.
- Most cohorts had over 100 participants, with a sizeable percentage of the participants being women
- Most participants came from wealthy families or positions of relative prominence within Afghan society

Goals:

- to develop civil society leaders and "increase opportunities...to develop and apply leadership capabilities".
- to help youth and other underrepresented groups have a say in the nation-building and democratic processes

Successes

Many notable alumni accolades

Brought local knowledge into national discussions of the country's struggles

Opportunities for future international cooperation

Result: agency of the Afghan people

Challenges

Maintaining engagement of participants post-tour

how to enable young leaders who are not already prominent and wealthy in their society

Successes

- Many notable alumni accolades, including Ramiz Bakhtiar who was the youth representative to give a speech to the UN Security Council
- Brought local knowledge into national and international discussions of Afghanistan's struggles
  - Going back to the key goals of Building Block 1, the ECSL program is an example of identifying emerging leadership and giving them a voice to participate in discussions of Afghanistan's governance
  - In addition, by providing this opportunity to marginalized youths, the ECSL program succeeds in promoting the use their local knowledge in solving the problems facing Afghanistan, thus achieving the goal of operationalizing local knowledge that is paramount to Building Block 1
- The ECSL program also provides opportunities for international cooperation wherein the new Afghan youth leaders will be better able to utilize their own knowledge and skills

Challenges

- Although the ECSL program can largely be seen as a success, one of it's primary challenges is in reaching potential youth leaders who are not already from wealth or prominent families or positions
  - This challenge is similar to that faced by the Afghanistan Young Leaders Initiative mentioned earlier, and is significant when considered along with Building Block 1 of the ISA framework
  - For example, according to Building Block 1, the ECSL program should identify emerging leadership among traditionally excluded groups
    - On an international scale, this has been achieved since Afghans are historically excluded from having a prominent voice in discussions of the events in their country
    - On a national scale, however, the fact that the program was made up of mostly wealthy or prominent members of Afghan society means that the truly marginalized groups are still not being included
  - Ultimately, this means marginalized groups are still not getting a voice and still cannot offer their local knowledge to help with the challenges facing Afghanistan today
- Counterpart themselves have also stated that some participants stop working with Counterpart after the conclusion of the program, even when asked for feedback

Recommendations

A Protect the autonomy of local leadership

B Make additional efforts to include the marginalized

C Build training programs for organizational partnerships instead of individuals

Recommendations

- Work to protect the autonomy of the new youth leaders
  - Counterpart should work to prevent these new youth leaders from becoming what the scholar Majid Rahnema refers to as "change agents" or "barefoot specialists:" local leaders who simply to serve as a conduit for the ideas of the Global North (Rahnema, 135-6)
  - In this regard, Counterpart should focus primarily on leadership and problem solving skills, while allowing the youth leaders of Afghanistan to come up with solutions on their own
- Make additional effort to include marginalized voices
  - Although the participants of the ECSL program are marginalized in an international context, within Afghanistan many of them were already in relative positions of power or privilege
  - In order to give a voice to marginalized groups, Counterpart should make a conscientious effort to recruit those who have never been in a leadership position before and are unlikely to have a chance, such as those from traditionally neglected provinces(contrast this with the Afghanistan Young Leaders Initiative mentioned earlier, which only recruits people already in leadership positions)
  - To help with this, Counterpart should use the power mapping technique within Building Block 1 to map out who is traditionally excluded from positions of power, and target those groups for ECSL
- Finally, as the program is now over Counterpart should encourage these new leaders to run their own programs similar to those of the ECSL program

Our Deepest Gratitude to:

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especially Rebecca Giovannozzi

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especially Shelley Inglis

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