

2.3 HOW TO FIGHT CORRUPTION IN AFGHANISTAN: A COMMUNITY PROJECT EXAMPLE

*Interview with Yama Torabi,
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Q: What is the relation between corruption and transnational organized crime in Afghanistan?

In the past years there has been a policy of patronage and accommodation – of putting former warlords into power. This patronage means that there is an environment for corruption to thrive. Some of these former warlords are people who have been accommodated by the power in order to create a kind of stability and peace. Because they feel protected since they are still active in the political arena and within the political elite, many would commit crimes such as kidnapping or drug trafficking, or other typical organized crimes, in connection with corruption and patronage. Patronage per se is not a crime, but it creates an environment where the actors who are working for the state or who are involved in the international military or aid system can abuse the power they get.

Q: What is the focus of your anticorruption activities?

In Afghanistan organized crime is widespread, however the typical crimes connected to transnational organized crime, such as human and drug trafficking, are already tackled by international agencies operating in the country, such as the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, UN Development Programme, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. We decided to fight corruption because it had not been addressed before, and that although it is a big issue in Afghanistan affecting a large part of society.

Q: What is the involvement of people in anticorruption – and in the community-based monitoring programs?

We started community-based monitoring programs because the state was absent. Such programs provide for citizen oversight over different types of things, service deliveries for instance. The implementation of aid is another area. What we basically do is encourage the community to reduce these gaps in oversight: Instead of having the government oversee things, we encourage the communities that are present in an area that benefits from a service to go and monitor the projects. This

would happen for infrastructural projects such as schools, clinics, roads, but we also apply this to justice. People go to courts, they attend trials, and they monitor the performance of the judiciary. They look into the very basic procedures a trial is supposed to follow. This approach will improve the delivery of justice.

These programs are pretty effective, because in an environment where there is almost no presence of the state in terms of fighting corruption, the community can play a very effective role. We have been able to improve 50 percent of the infrastructural projects, because people are able to detect problems and address them. But the impacts may even go beyond that 50 percent. It is actually difficult to measure the efficiency of the programs because we prevent acts of abuse and corruption, and we are not able to account for the preventive part of the programs. I also personally think that our impact is a lot more than that. These programs transform communities and towns into active agents of change – integrity champions who will move ahead and ask for accountability in other areas.

The program works with communities of the four provinces of Nangarhar, Balkh, Herat, and Parwan with the aim of monitoring reconstruction projects. This program started in 2008 with 12 communities, and, over the years, has grown due to its success in empowering citizens to play an active role in promoting integrity and accountability. Integrity Watch Afghanistan (IWA) instructs the community-elected monitors on integrity and engineering. The community-based monitoring, although not highly technical, has the advantage that the monitors are present during the construction cycle, and they are more capable of identifying irregularities.

Typically, 90 percent of development projects are funded by international aid, yet they have failed in Afghanistan because there is no meaningful independent monitoring. With the country's security situation being a major problem, donors are not able to ensure that the projects that they fund in the provinces will be implemented according to plan. What IWA does is to make up for the deficiencies and oversights of the donors through accountability measures that are provided by the communities on a voluntary basis and are free of cost. We do not pay people, since we consider this work to be part for a civic undertaking – a duty for each citizen. This program has been very successful. The infrastructural projects we monitor are the basis for delivering public services, such as schools, clinics, roads, etc. These services are essential for the community, and the infrastructure projects need to remain in the best condition for as long as possible in order to reduce the costs of maintenance, which are usually paid for by the Afghan state, meaning by the communities themselves, and not by the donors.

India has created this model of community monitoring and has disseminated it. In Uganda communities monitor the budgets of such infrastructural projects. In many places in the world people will monitor the presence of teachers in order to prevent phantom teachers. In Kyrgyzstan, for instance, people are monitoring the delivery of social services, meaning that people get their pension and retire-

ment money from the state. In case this does not happen, they act at a high level, and by doing so they manage to improve the lives of millions of people.

Q: What is the social perception of corruption in Afghanistan?

Corruption is perceived as a problem. People are experiencing it on a daily basis, and the issue is that they are not able to effectively fight against it when it is at a higher level, like at the national or provincial level, where people of great influence and power are involved. Thus, what we do with our programs is to empower the communities, give them access and resources, and thus help them to put pressure on some powerful people not to commit of corruption. Technically, it is a preventive approach. We are able to make changes because people are aware of the problem of corruption. They have empirical evidence corruption, even though they do not have the analytical understanding of the issue. And they condemn it. This is why we have succeeded, so far, in operating with the communities. Over the four years that we have implemented this community monitoring program, no community has abandoned the project.

Q: What is the role of the international community in this?

The international community should help Afghanistan in fighting corruption, however the United Nations Convention Against Corruption and other UN treaties, such as on Human Rights, still give the responsibility for implementation to the national authorities. Therefore, fighting corruption easily becomes a problem of sovereignty, and it gives local authorities a pretext for not tackling corruption at an international level. I believe the international community should have done – and could do – a lot more. The donors fund the development budget of the Afghan government in its entirety, and 75 percent of the aid money that is spent in Afghanistan comes directly from donors. The donors face the same corruption problems as the Afghan state. We can not just blame Afghanistan. The international community has its own responsibilities. The fight against corruption starts with accountability and transparency, yet the international organizations operating here are totally opaque and non-transparent. If you ask for basic information, like how they spend their money, or which current projects are going on, it is very hard to receive any answers. This is typically the case for most UN agencies, which have been active in the country since 2001. Similarly, billions of US dollars, donated by US agencies and to be spent in Afghanistan, are unaccounted for and we do not know how they have been spent.

If you look at the aid coming from outside, 90 percent of the aid money spent in Afghanistan comes from the United States, be it for military or civilian aims. If you look at the companies that are being awarded infrastructure contracts, those that invested a lot on lobbying the US Congress: These companies have a lot of power. In terms of costs, they are more expensive, ten times more expensive compared to local companies. A lot of money is indeed wasted or kept for corporate profits, instead of really being invested in the projects. Money is spent on huge

salaries for those that oversee employees. I have seen one case of an expatriate in Afghanistan who was getting \$60,000 a month.

Q: What should be the role of the media?

The media could help a lot because they are the eyes through which we look at corruption; they are responsible for informing citizens about these issues. They can play a role in terms of transparency. Investigative journalism should highlight cases that, otherwise, would remain unknown. At the moment there is a lack of capacity because many journalists are very young and do not have the capacities to investigate. Moreover, the media are organized in factions reflecting political and ethnic divides. Most of the media groups belong to either commanders, or political parties, or influential figures, like the patrons of Afghan politics. Therefore, they cannot independently cover the issue of high-level corruption and often the reports are biased. The content in terms of information and the analysis you expect from the media is not there. For this reason many people do not watch television, do not read newspapers because they cannot expect free information. This is a big problem in Afghanistan. We try to work with the few media organizations –five or six –that are known for being independent and professional, in order to advance the cause of anti-corruption.

Q: Do young people participate in anti-corruption programs?

The younger generations are not involved in anti-corruption. The typical activist profile is of a man, although women are starting to play a greater role. Youths face corruption but they are not organized to fight it. We are trying to work with youth organizations because often the mere denunciation of the problem is not enough. There is a need to take action to reduce the space and opportunities for corruption, but so far the the activism of young people has not been directed toward anti-corruption. One good example of involving the youth is the anti-corruption race that was launched last year. This increases the awareness of the youth by even physically engaging them in this activity.

Q: How about tax evasion in Afghanistan?

Tax evasion is a big issue in Afghanistan, but there is little information on this. I see many companies that are not paying taxes because there is no verification. For example, construction companies should pay taxes on the import of materials, but usually there is no possibility to verify this except by sending an investigator or auditor, but until now this has not been done. Companies thus under-declare the amount of money they pay to employees or simply declare fewer employees than they actually have. In Kandahar Province in Afghanistan, the government doesn't have much control. Moreover, the officials who work at the border in the war on terror are allied with the coalition and the patronage network that dominates the region, and therefore customs duties are not being paid. The head of

anti-corruption in Afghanistan recently said that very many people in the region do not pay taxes.

If you look at the Afghan economy, you can see that it is mostly based on imports: Around \$400 million worth of goods are exported and \$8 billion worth of goods are imported. It is an urgent problem and it is also underreported. The customs offices are the most corrupt institutions in Afghanistan, so people pay bribes and everything goes underreported. The former head of the anti-corruption unit once gave me the figures from Dubai in the Emirates – exports to Afghanistan totaled \$2 billion in 2011 and the figure recorded by the Afghan government was \$500 million, four times less. That means that the importers paid at least four times less customs duties than what they were supposed to. And this is an example of tax evasion on products coming from only one country, the United Arab Emirates.

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