

Defending Human Rights From Exile

A Report on the Challenges and Opportunities of Afghan HRDs in Re-establishing and Operating their NGOs in Canada, Europe, the UK, and the US

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
HRDs	Human Rights Defenders
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
RWI	Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human rights and Humanitarian Law
Sida	Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
UN	United Nations
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

Executive Summary

Background: After the fall of Kabul by the Taliban in August 2021, many Afghan HRDs were relocated abroad, particularly to Europe, the US, the UK, and Canada. Some of these HRDs have already attempted to rebuild their NGOs and work for human rights in Afghanistan while in exile, but they have encountered significant challenges in doing so.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to ascertain: First, what challenges and opportunities Afghan HRDs face in re-establishing and operating their NGOs in exile; and second, to determine what recommendations are appropriate to address these challenges.

Method: In July and August 2022, a series of interviews were conducted with Afghan HRDs who were directors of their NGOs and have already re-established or are in the process of re-establishing their NGOs in Europe, the US, the UK, and Canada.

Results: The study found that the issues Afghan HRDs face are primarily obtaining appropriate human and financial resources, as well as technical and operational challenges. However, they see their motivation and commitment to human rights change in Afghanistan and the potential support they would receive from INGOs; the chance to observe and document human rights violations; the chance to organise artistic events on human rights while in exile; and the chance to advocate for human rights change outside Afghanistan as potential opportunities.

Conclusion: Despite the challenges, Afghan HRDs in exile also have great proficiency, such as the knowledge and experience gained from 20 years of working for human rights in Afghanistan; they are motivated by and committed to improving the human rights of their people; and they have platforms on which to work and advocate for Afghanistan when in their countries of exile. Hence, receiving support would be beneficial not only for Afghanistan now, but also the future when the situation improves and they can return. However, if they are unable to re-establish themselves as HRDs and their NGOs while in exile, they will most likely migrate to other walks of life; their expertise would thus be wasted and Afghanistan would lose the potential positive effects these HRDs could help bring about.

Recommendations: Afghan HRDs must first reconvene and work on different platforms. It is recommended that donor agencies, and INGOs in particular, provide legal, financial and technical support through capacity-building strategies, such as fiscal sponsorship and/or secondment programmes for Afghan HRDs to monitor and document human rights violations, organise artistic events for human rights, and advocate for change, especially for the opening of civic space, and so keep the flame of human rights alive for Afghanistan.

Introduction

15 August 2021 was one of the darkest days in the last 20 years of Afghanistan's history. On that day, Afghanistan's former president, Ashraf Ghani, fled the country and a presidential democratic structure crumbled into the hands of the Taliban, a group that has been considered terrorists by both the Afghan government and the international community for the past 20 years. The Taliban suspended the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and, in its place, proclaimed the state of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, a government of absolute degeneracy composed of an all-male and predominantly Pashtun ethnic group ruled by a supreme leader called an Emir. This drastic and unexpected change in the country has negatively impacted the lives of all citizens of Afghanistan in all spheres of life. Due to the Taliban's threats, many people from various vulnerable groups have fled to different countries. One of these vulnerable groups, among the main targets of the Taliban, was HRDs.

Afghan HRDs, many of whom were organised in NGOs before the fall of Afghanistan, are the defenders of human rights and freedom in the country and have been working for years to strengthen the democratic government and create a situation whereby every citizen in Afghanistan could enjoy their freedom and their human rights. After the Taliban took over, Afghan HRDs dispersed to different parts of the world and their NGOs consequently either disbanded or lost their focus on human rights. Nevertheless, after more than a year of Taliban control in Afghanistan and the relocation of HRDs, some Afghan HRDs resumed their attempt to rebuild and restructure themselves as human rights NGOs in exile. However, they face challenges.

This research was conducted to determine the challenges and opportunities faced by Afghan HRDs, first in re-establishing and secondly in operating an NGO in exile, and to present them in a report. Based on the research findings, the report will also provide a set of recommendations to various and relevant actors and mechanisms as to how they can work with Afghan HRDs to effectively change the human rights situation in Afghanistan.

To this end, a series of interviews were conducted with 12 Afghan HRDs, who were directors of their human rights NGOs. Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed and analysed using a mix of deductive and inductive approaches with a focus on thematic analysis. Through this analysis, several common themes emerged, which are discussed in this report under the two main themes of **challenges and opportunities** of Afghan HRDs in re-establishing and operating their NGOs in exile.

Methodology

Method of Data Collection

To obtain data for the study, 12 Afghan HRDs, seven men and five women, who were directors of their NGOs now based in European countries, the UK, the US, and Canada, were interviewed during July and August 2022. Conducting interviews was the most appropriate method to determine what HRDs go through individually and collectively to re-establish themselves in exile. The interviews were conducted through the online platforms Zoom and WhatsApp, and included both structured and open-ended questions on re-establishing and operating an NGO in exile. About 30 questions were developed but varied in each interview, depending on the background, the current situation of the HRD, and the discussion during the interview, which usually lasted an hour. While a deductive approach was used in developing the questions to identify the potential challenges and opportunities facing HRDs, at the end of the interviews, respondents were also asked to add anything not included in the questions that they felt was relevant to the topic of the report. In addition, the report incorporated some minor findings from the strategic meeting of 12 Afghan human rights activists on the situational analysis of Afghan HRDs in exile, hosted by the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) in Geneva, Switzerland, 17-20 October 2022.

Method of Data Analysis

After the interviews were conducted and the recordings were ready, they were transcribed using the manual transcription method. While in the phase of developing the questionnaires, a deductive approach was used to structure the questions; in the analysis phase, however, an inductive approach and the method of thematic analysis were used to extract and analyse the data. The rationale for this approach was to not limit ourselves to the themes already developed for the creation of the questionnaires, but also to consider the themes that emerged from the interviews. Therefore, the topics discussed in this report are the result of a mixed approach, that is, both deductive and inductive approaches, and the use of the method of thematic analysis.

Structure

The report is divided into two parts: 1-Description and 2-Recommendations.

The first part describes (1)-The challenges and opportunities associated with re-establishing an NGO when in exile; and (2)-The challenges and opportunities associated with operating an NGO when in exile.

The second part contains 15 recommendations appropriate for Afghan HRDs in exile, donors and INGOs, states, and UNAMA.

Part One: Description

1-Re-establishment Challenges

This section addresses the challenges Afghan HRDs face in re-establishing their NGOs in their countries of exile. After analysing the transcripts and codes, it was found that all challenges related to re-establishing an NGO can be assigned to three main themes: 1-Human resources, 2-Financial resources, and 3-Technical capacity.

1.1-Human Resources

This theme points to the challenges faced by NGO staff members themselves. The analysis of the data revealed that these issues consist of five main sub-themes: 1-Integration challenges, 2-Decrease in interest, 3-Competence/lack of expertise, 4-Mental health/psychological trauma, and 5-Lack of experts.

1.1.1-Integration

Integration has been one of the most common challenges for Afghan HRDs in their new countries. Renewal of visa and residence permits, as well as learning the culture and, in most cases, learning a new language are the biggest challenges they face, which have hindered their rehabilitation and efforts to rebuild themselves and their NGOs. In some cases, especially in the US, the legal and residency status of HRDs is unclear, even though they have been resettled and their background is known to host countries. They are unsure of their future and residence in the country and are therefore unable to begin their efforts towards the larger task of rebuilding an NGO and working in exile.

Mary Akrami, the director of the Afghan Women's Network, who was resettled in the US, is one of those struggling with residency and visa issues, and suffering from personal problems integrating into society. She says: "Our fate is still not clear,"¹ by which she means, in particular, the status of her visa as it was issued for a certain period and she is not sure what will happen after that period. When asked her about the situation and future of her organisation in the US, she repeatedly referred to integration issues, saying, "I am literally struggling with problems and challenges beyond my imagination,"² underscoring several personal problems she faces in exile.

The language barrier, especially in European countries, is the other major challenge for HRDs. Learning a new language takes a lot of time and effort and, in some countries, documents are not written in English. Some HRDs are also not proficient enough in English to function properly in society. This prevents them from communicating with the local authorities and putting forward their suggestions for human rights work while in

¹ Mary Akrami, US, August 27, 2022

² Mary Akrami, US, August 27, 2022

exile. Furthermore, they have to attend language courses as part of their integration process, which limits the time for their work as human rights activists. Due to this barrier, HRDs living in exile, mainly in European countries, are not sure if they can quickly integrate into society, especially into the labour market for human rights work, as they already know what an obstacle language can be.

1.1.2- Decrease in Interest

Some HRDs who worked at NGOs in Afghanistan disengaged from the organisational structure after being transferred to other countries. They were not evacuated and resettled from Afghanistan in an orderly manner – some were evacuated earlier, some later, some to one country and some to another, and some remained in Afghanistan. The dispersal to different regions has reduced the sense of organisational connectedness and, if an NGO is to restructure with its former staff, this re-assimilation would take time. But even if the dispersal of HRDs across different countries and time zones did not diminish their interest in working together, it still had a negative impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of their work. Aside from not having a physical address, they also cannot co-ordinate their activities online, as Aziz Rafiee, executive director of the Afghan Civil Society Forum points out, "One of our biggest challenges is that we have to work almost 24 hours a day, which means we have a time difference with Kabul, Europe, and other places in Canada, and our meetings with our colleagues are not co-ordinated."³ If they cannot work at the same time and hold joint meetings, this not only poses a logistical problem but also has a negative impact on the outcome of their interventions.

Some HRDs, on the other hand, are reluctant to re-organise themselves into an NGO as they do not see NGO work, especially human rights efforts, as a sustainable form of work and life in exile. They believe that if they focus on working at or as an NGO, they would jeopardise their chances to gain new knowledge and experience so as to integrate into their new society. At the same time, they have no clear idea about their future work in that society. Nevertheless, some of them preferred to integrate locally instead of focusing on being restructured into a human rights NGO.

In talking to the NGO directors, some of them said that a number of their employees have left their NGOs and either found a job, or are continuing their studies, or trying to move to another area of work. The directors of the NGOs are not happy about this but, of course, there is nothing they can do about it. It is the HRDs' right to move to other businesses; however, it can also be seen as a shortcoming in defending the human rights of Afghanistan's people.

1.1.3-Competence

Among other factors, the standards of NGOs working in the European countries, Canada, the US, and the UK, differ from the work of NGOs in Afghanistan. Not all HRDs in Afghanistan had an academic background or the expertise to allow them to easily fit into the work environment in the countries in which they now live. Several HRDs acknowledged this problem and view lack of capacity as a challenge to working and competing in the NGO sector in their countries of residence. Mohammad Rahim Jami, the executive director of Movement for Support Quality Education in Afghanistan, now based in Canada, says:

"The knowledge and experience of our staff was based on Afghanistan standards, but those standards are no longer acceptable here. Only 10% of

³ Aziz Rafiee, Canada, July 23, 2022

HRDs' academic background would likely be accepted; the remaining 90% would likely be rejected."⁴

He adds that they require some needs-based, capacity-building programmes conducted by INGOs so they can become competent and work easily as NGOs in exile.

Although some HRDs do not know the language of their host country, they also do not necessarily have a preference for English, which further complicates their work. If they do not know the local languages, they cannot communicate with local organisations, and not knowing English prevents them from networking and communicating with international organisations inside or outside the country, which are the main tools for HRDs to be established and work as an NGO.

There are several other professional and practical issues that HRDs face, such as proposal writing, developing an organisational strategy, and other relevant documents. A case in point: Shahrbanu Haidari, vice president of the Associazione di solidarietà donne per le donne, an HRD relocated to Italy, said, "We were not familiar with the way of writing proposals here. Only later did we understand that the European way of writing proposals is different from the American way, which we did not know much about."⁵ Perhaps this challenge seems like a small issue that HRDs could solve one way or another, but they are a hindrance to re-organising and, more importantly, to continuing as NGOs. For example, to get projects you need a standard proposal, a professional analysis of the different aspects of a project, including the problem, the stakeholders, the goal and, most importantly for HRDs, the monitoring and evaluation of activities and objectives. Most NGOs appear to be working from exile, albeit for Afghanistan, and they are more likely to need professional skills to convince funders that they can implement projects and programmes while in exile.

1.1.4-Mental Health

15 August 2021, was not only an unusual day for the Afghan people but also a particularly shocking one. Considering many factors, including the promises of the ousted Afghan government and the international community to preserve the values created in Afghanistan over the past 20 years, the people did not expect such a dramatic change. Yet, a democratic government with the values of human rights and individual freedom that people had fought for for decades was removed in the blink of an eye. This traumatic change particularly endangered HRDs, political activists, military personnel, women, and media workers.

As a result, some Afghan HRDs spoken with have indicated that the mental state of HRDs inside and outside Afghanistan is disturbed after the Taliban takeover. Aziz Rafiee says of the situation in Afghanistan: "The spirit of work in Afghanistan has disappeared and the environment is suffocating."⁶ Freshta Karim, director and founder of non-profit organisation Charmaghz, referring to her co-workers in Afghanistan says, "Our colleagues are traumatised, their motives have changed a lot, some of them have gained more motives [to work], but when they walk around [the new environment] annoys them."⁷ It is not only those who stayed in Afghanistan that are psychologically disturbed – those HRDs who were transferred to other countries are also mentally troubled. As Mary Akrami says, "I have been working for many years for the women who are victims of family violence, but

⁴ Mohammad Rahim Jami, Canada, July 27, 2022

⁵ Shahrbanu Haidari, Italy, August 03, 2022

⁶ Aziz Rafiee, Canada, July 23, 2022

⁷ Freshta Karim, UK, August 25, 2022

now I see that I am a victim. My fate and future are uncertain, what will happen and what will not."⁸ This tentative situation, combined with the complexity of the registration process and the vulnerability of HRDs as immigrants, makes it even more difficult for them to re-establish themselves as functioning NGOs in exile.

1.1.5-Lack of Experts

As NGO members have migrated after the fall of Afghanistan, the directors of the organisations face the challenge of finding and rallying their professionals around the NGO. For example, Abdullah Ahmadi, director of the Afghanistan Democracy and Development Organization (ADDO), says they have to find new recruits with good knowledge and experience. Likewise, Horia Mosadiq, director of the Safety and Risk Mitigation Organization (SRMO), says:

"A large mass of HRDs have left the country, and those who have newly started working [in Afghanistan] need a lot of work to become known. But the vacuum that has been created probably will not be filled for another decade."⁹

This is especially the case for those NGOs that still have an office or branch in Afghanistan. Therefore, they need to hire staff outside Afghanistan to address the technical activities and needs of their NGOs.

This dearth of experts hits female HRDs the hardest, as it is difficult for NGOs to find and hire qualified female HRDs within the country. Raouf Modaqiq, vice president of Future Brilliance Afghanistan, notes: "It is a challenge to find a capable female colleague. This is partly because more and more people are trying to leave the country and partly because the Taliban have put the men in charge of the women in the families."¹⁰ This prevents women from actively participating in society and working in organisations because some men do not want to risk being prosecuted by the Taliban because their female family members do not wear the Taliban-mandated hijab or burqa when they go out or work in offices.

1.2-Financial Resources

Financial issues are another major challenge Afghan HRDs face when re-establishing their NGOs while in exile. Among various types of financial challenges, four were prevalent.

1.2.1-Lack of Resources

For an NGO to be re-established by HRDs living in exile, it must at least have dedicated staff, be registered with local authorities, have its internal documents redrafted, and have a dedicated bank account, all of which require financial resources. Some of the NGOs have money in their bank accounts in Afghanistan that have been frozen to which they no longer have access. If NGOs want to operate in exile, they need to work on certain activities, such as capacity-building, research and advocacy, for which donors are not that willing to provide money to NGOs now in exile – they are more interested in focusing on NGOs still working in Afghanistan. They believe

⁸ Mary Akrami, US, August 27, 2022

⁹ Horia Mosadiq, UK, July 27, 2022

¹⁰ Raouf Modaqiq, Germany, August 11, 2022

that NGOs in exile have no relevance on the ground, overlooking the ability of Afghan HRDs to monitor and document human rights violations in Afghanistan and, more importantly, to advocate for change in the country on various platforms – all while in exile.

As a result, lack of funding remains one of the biggest challenges for Afghan HRDs seeking to regain their footing. For example, Sanjar Sohail, director of 8AM Media, believes Afghanistan has become less of a priority for some countries and organisations and is almost forgotten, which makes receiving funds from them questionable. He notes that funding is needed to keep NGOs functioning when outside Afghanistan. He also says the lack of resources means they cannot do the work to the required quality.¹¹ Freshta Karim says, "We would like to register our NGO in the UK, but we do not have enough money to do it. Therefore, we have approached pro bono organisations that can help NGOs register in the UK"¹². That said, it is not entirely clear to what extent the pro bono organisations can help the various NGOs get started. And if they do help them get started, the question remains as to how the NGOs would operate as sustainable organisations.

1.2.2-High Costs

The cost of labour and living in the countries the HRDs are now located is far higher than in Afghanistan, making it difficult for NGO directors to keep their staff when in exile. As the NGOs do not have the financial resources to support the HRDs, the HRDs have to change their work to survive. Abdullah Ahmadi says: "We have to at least have the means to keep our staff."¹³ However, given the high cost of labour in many other countries, some directors are seeking to hire employees inside Afghanistan in exchange for increased capacity. As for hiring employees in exile, Freshta Karim says:

"When we hired a person in Afghanistan, the cost was very low, but if we want to hire a person in the UK, who is technically skilled in fundraising, [their] salary should be at least 2,500 pounds, which is a serious challenge."¹⁴

Furthermore, if they are not able to hire qualified fundraising and organisational development consultants in, say, the UK, they cannot overcome these challenges by hiring someone in-country (if they have an office in Afghanistan) as they have no idea about the challenges in, for example, the UK. This all has a direct and negative impact on rebuilding an NGO in exile.

Shahrbanu Haidari had a different story. As NGOs run by refugees are not adequately supported, she had to register her organisation as an association rather than an NGO. She says, "Since we are refugees and the Italian system offers less support than that of other European countries ... the only way we can continue our human rights activities is to create an association."¹⁵ Being registered as an association means being exempt from the high tax for the organisation and its potential projects in the future. As the scope of work of an association is different to that of an organisation, this would automatically limit the kind of interventions it can make.

¹¹ Sanjar Sohail, Canada, July 26, 2022

¹² Freshta Karim, UK, August 25, 2022

¹³ Abdullah Ahmadi, France, July 22, 2022

¹⁴ Freshta Karim, UK, August 25, 2022

¹⁵ Shahrbanu Haidari, Italy, August 03, 2022

1.2.3-Opening Bank Accounts

Opening bank accounts for NGOs has been a common challenge for HRDs due to bureaucratic obstacles in some countries. For example, in Geneva, Switzerland, it is very easy to register an NGO, but it is not easy to open a bank account for that NGO. As NGOs depend on funding, they cannot build their organisation and their work if they do not have established bank accounts. Even with no problems in other areas, everything they do depends on the money they receive from donors.

Another unresolved issue is that if an NGO wants to open a bank account in one country while its employees are scattered in different places, they think there may be two fees or taxes on the employees' salaries – one in the country in which the NGO is registered and collects money, and one from the bank with which the employees have their personal accounts. This is one of the reasons HRDs are reluctant to register their NGOs in a new country, as they do not know exactly what will happen regarding the issue of fees or taxes on salaries if the organisation's account and its employees' personal accounts are in different countries.

1.3-Technical Capacity

This focuses on the technical challenges HRDs face in the process of re-establishing themselves while in exile. These challenges exist partly because of their personal circumstances and partly because of the bureaucratic and legal conditions in the countries in which they reside.

1.3.1-Legal System Complexity

For HRDs to re-establish their NGOs in a new country, they need to familiarise themselves with the country's legal system. However, for almost all the HRDs interviewed, knowing the legal details of their countries regarding NGOs, especially NGOs for refugees, was a challenge. In this context, Aziz Rafiee says:

"Our biggest problem is a legal problem; we still do not understand what the laws are, whether we have to report something to the government or not. The federal laws are very different from the state laws. For example, the structure of the boards and their relationship with the secretariat are different in these two laws ... we do not know the standard of work in Canada, and we do not have the information we need about the laws and how they work in Canada."¹⁶

Furthermore, when HRDs think about re-establishing themselves as NGOs in exile and want to learn about the country in which they now reside, they are confronted with voluminous laws and regulations. In some countries, such as Canada, there are both national and state laws that make it difficult for HRDs to work, and which overwhelm them with different types of laws and regulations. Humira Saqib, director of Afghan Women News

¹⁶ Aziz Rafiee, Canada, July 23, 2022

Agency, says: "When you visit the website, you are confronted with an enormous amount of information,"¹⁷ which takes a lot of time to understand – and often leaves them doing nothing.

Another problem arises in some non-English speaking countries with it being difficult to find the English version of the laws, which is a double challenge for HRDs. Shahrbanu Haidari cites Italy as an example. She says it is hard to find documents in English and describes this challenge as "a serious problem"¹⁸ for her in Italy.

1.3.2-Work Inception

Some HRDs who have already completed the initial tasks for re-establishing their NGOs are stuck and do not know how or where to actually begin. They seemed helpless and needed someone to take them by the hand and start the work. Therefore, they needed a consultant or expert to help them get started. Mohammad Rahim Jami says, "We need one and a half to two years to understand the laws and procedures ourselves. That's why we need a legal advisor to help with the documents, although we know it's very expensive to hire a consultant."¹⁹ HRDs believe that registering and establishing an NGO will be much easier if they have a legal advisor to help them through the various stages.

In addition to a legal advisor, they also need a technical advisor and a fundraising advisor because they want to build almost everything from scratch. For example, Abdullah Ahmadi says they "seriously" need a consultant because the societal environment, the scope of work, and the way of working are now different for HRDs. He adds that the mechanisms and strategies they had in Afghanistan have now all changed. Therefore, they need a consultant to advise them or to increase the capacity of their colleagues.²⁰ Similarly, Aziz Rafiee says, "We urgently need a legal advisor, a consultant to develop a strategy to regulate the interconnections between offices, and a fundraising consultant,"²¹ referring to the urgency of professional experts who can help with the fundamentals of developing a strategic plan for their work.

Another point regarding NGOs that start their work in exile is that they cannot establish an NGO that focuses only on Afghanistan. This is a requirement by host countries and HRDs must therefore restructure themselves as INGOs, which further complicates the creation of new NGOs in exile. Aziz Rafiee confirms this problem, adding, "We need [advisors] to move forward as an international organisation."²²

The experience of working from exile is in itself a new and exacting experience for HRDs; when they have to focus on other countries about which they have little knowledge or understanding, it becomes a serious challenge. Starting work seems to be difficult even if they have consultants working with them for some time, or unless an INGO directly takes care of that part of their tasks until they are able to do it themselves.

¹⁷ Humira Saqib, Canada, August 02, 2022

¹⁸ Shahrbanu Haidari, Italy, August 03, 2022

¹⁹ Mohammad Rahim Jami, Canada, July 23, 2022

²⁰ Abdullah Ahmadi, France, July 22, 2022

²¹ Aziz Rafiee, Canada, July 23, 2022

²² Aziz Rafiee, Canada, July 23, 2022

1.3.3-Bureaucracy

The bureaucratic process for registering an NGO varies from country to country for HRDs living in exile. For example, HRDs living in Canada, Italy, the US, and the UK complained about the lengthy bureaucratic process they faced in registering their NGOs. However, in some countries, such as France and Sweden, the bureaucratic process is not as complicated and HRDs can easily register their NGOs. For Mary Akrami, who lives in the US, registering her NGO was one of the biggest challenges and was repeatedly highlighted as an obstacle by her during the interview. She had started the registration process in February 2022 but was not able to register her NGO by our interview in August 2022, even though a US organisation sponsored it, which is a requirement for NGO registration. Saying, "There is a lot of paperwork here,"²³ she desperately expressed her feelings about the registration process. Freshta Karim, who was resettled in the UK, also felt this desperation, describing the registration process as "lengthy and time-consuming"²⁴ and which she had struggled with for four to five months. Mohammad Rahim Jami, who lives in Canada, also said that he was unable to meet all the checklists provided by the Canadian government due to the complexity of the system and its criteria.²⁵

1.3.4-Fundraising

NGOs are different to foundations or other associations in terms of fundraising, as they rely on funds from donors. Although fundraising was also a constant challenge for HRDs and NGOs in Afghanistan, they were at least somewhat familiar with fundraising methods in the country after years of working with various donors. There were also NGOs that received core funding for several years. However, after being relocated to other countries, fundraising has become one of the biggest challenges for the HRDs, as some of their former donors no longer support them and they also do not know how to familiarise themselves with new donor organisations. Some HRDs said they had reached out to their previous donors but have not been successful in attracting them to their programmes because the context, and therefore the criteria and conditions, have changed.

Freshta Karim highlights the fundraising capacity that she believes was lacking in her NGO:

"After the fall of Afghanistan, we did not have money or the skills to raise money. We were not registered with donors, and we had not strengthened our fundraising skills as a team, which was a very serious problem."²⁶

She went on to say that the NGO has approached a few organisations for fundraising, but she feels that: "[Fundraising] requires a network, which we had in Kabul, but we feel now that we do not know many people working in different organisations."²⁷ She believes fundraising will be difficult without skills and getting to know people in international organisations.

²³ Mary Akrami, US, August 27, 2022

²⁴ Freshta Karim, UK, August 25, 2022

²⁵ Mohammad Rahim Jami, Canada, July 23, 2022

²⁶ Freshta Karim, UK, August 25, 2022

²⁷ Freshta Karim, UK, August 25, 2022

1.3.5-Professional Adaptation

In some countries, HRDs cannot establish an NGO that focuses only on Afghanistan and so must establish an INGO that focuses on multiple countries. This requirement has put them in a bind and doubled their challenges along the way. It means they have to re-orientate their NGO from the ground up. This challenges them to develop an organisational strategy; develop different types of policies; and reflect on their organisational name, brand, vision, and mission. Pondering these elements, considering various factors, and coming to an agreement is a very time-consuming process that hinders the simple re-establishment of an NGO. As Humira Saqib notes, "Believe me, we even got lost for almost a month just because of the name of our NGO,"²⁸ to name one aspect of these multi-dimensional challenges.

HRDs also have to consider the de facto authorities' conditions if they want to have an office inside Afghanistan. In this regard, Abdullah Ahmadi said they had many discussions about putting a word other than "democracy" in the name of their NGO as they had been asked to remove it. One of the focuses of the NGO was democracy-building in Afghanistan and they wanted to continue with that as part of the NGO's brand, but the de facto authorities there asked them to remove the word, which left the NGO's members wondering how to remove it and whether they wanted to replace it with something that covered their scope of work.

The challenge of professional adaptation does not end only with the name or other technical challenges, as Freshta Karim notes, it is also about the long process it takes to get to know the culture and become a member of the working circle and the working environment. HRDs have to answer many questions themselves, such as how NGOs fund their projects, where they get funding from, and how they operate. She describes the process of getting to know the new work culture and fitting into it as a time-consuming and demanding one, which makes it difficult to rebuild an NGO quickly.²⁹

²⁸ Humira Saqib, Canada, August 02, 2022

²⁹ Freshta Karim, UK, August 25, 2022

2-Re-establishment Opportunities

This section focuses on the potential opportunities Afghan HRDs have in rebuilding their NGOs while in exile.

2.1-Motivation and Commitment of Afghan HRDs in Exile

Afghan human rights activists are passionate about human rights in Afghanistan, especially at this critical time when many of the people's human rights, especially those of women and girls, are being violated by the de facto authorities. Aziz Rafiee says, "The Afghan people do not deserve this punishment,"³⁰ underscoring the sentiment of all Afghan human rights activists who cannot remain silent when the rights of their people are violated. Not only are they motivated to stand up for the human rights of the Afghan people, they say it is their duty to do so and that they are committed to doing so. This kind of spirit and commitment among HRDs in exile is seen as an advantage and an opportunity to work for human rights in exile.

2.2-INGO Support

Some HRDs believe that INGOs and donor agencies can assist in rebuilding their NGOs while in exile. Some donor agencies have a specific budget that HRDs can use to restructure an NGO; get registered; hire a consultant to redefine the NGO's role and strategy; and give them professional advice on renewing all the documents needed to start up again. Some HRDs work individually, and usually part-time, with the Afghanistan programmes of some INGOs, for example, Front Line Defenders and the OMCT.

There is also a tendency in some organisations to keep HRDs engaged in human rights work through fellowship programmes. For example, Sida supports fellowship programmes for HRDs at the RWI. By creating a visiting professor position at RWI, Sida also supports the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur – Richard Bennett, and his three Afghan HRD assistants – with regard to human rights in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, most Afghan HRDs do not see a clear perspective, strategy or promise from INGOs regarding long-term support for themselves and especially their NGOs in exile, and therefore could not mention any other opportunities when asked. They are concerned about not being able to engage in human rights activities and are afraid of losing their human rights potential and skills if they engage in different arenas.

³⁰ Aziz Rafiee, Canada, July 23, 2022

3-Operational Challenges

This section addresses the challenges HRDs face as NGOs when they begin their actual work in exile. The use of the IPO model (Input. Process. Output) served to better represent the different phases of an NGO's operation. Therefore, the challenges were divided into three main themes, which also represent the three different phases of an operation: 1-Input, 2-Process, and 3-Output. Input refers to challenges related to resources, both human and financial. Process refers to the challenges of the actual work done. Output focuses on the challenges related to the results of the operation or intervention.

3.1-Input Challenges

Here, the challenges related to an NGO's human and financial resources are discussed.

3.1.1-Money Transfer

For HRDs still in Afghanistan and NGOs that still have staff there, it is a major challenge to transfer money into the country from abroad, as banks in Afghanistan are sanctioned or under the control of the de facto authorities there. Instead, some HRDs use the "hawala system," an informal system for transferring money to Afghanistan in which HRDs transfer their money to a remittance office abroad that has partners in Afghanistan who then forwards the money to the recipients and charge a commission, which HRDs consider less efficient.

For example, Wadood Pedram, director of the Human Rights and Eradication of Violence Organisation, says, "We cannot send the money directly to the projects in Afghanistan, the money should come here, but the next step, how we send the money to Afghanistan, is not clear to us."³¹ Mohammad Rahim Jami sees the problem from a different angle, saying that, first, they cannot transfer money to Afghanistan; and secondly, there is also a question about how to report the money spent in Afghanistan to the Canadian authorities when they transfer it to Afghanistan.³²

Some NGOs, such as the one with Aziz Rafiee as chairman, had the idea of setting up two boards, one in Kabul and one in Canada, and signing a strategic memorandum between the two so they can transfer the money they collect in Canada to Afghanistan, and the money they collect in Afghanistan to Canada. They found this to be solution because, in his opinion, NGOs cannot spend money collected in Canada and transfer it abroad.

Another challenge for NGOs in exile is remitting the salaries of their staff in exile. This is especially true for HRDs living in Europe and for those involved in short-term projects. This is because HRDs who are not employed receive social security support from the government. If they are assigned to projects, their social assistance would be cut off, and this would be problematic if the projects are short-term as there would be a hiatus in the social assistance payments, then they would have to deal with the authorities to re-instate it once the project ends, with all the red tape that entails.

³¹ Wadood Pedram, Canada, July 23, 2022

³² Mohammad Rahim Jami, Canada, July 27, 2022

3.1.2-Donors and INGO Status

To establish themselves as NGOs and work in exile, HRDs need the support of donor and partner organisations, especially financial support. However, in discussions with various HRDs, it was noted that INGOs and donor agencies are in a state of suspension and have not yet developed a strategy for Afghanistan regarding HRDs working in exile. For example, Wadood Pedram says: "Honestly, we have not figured out what the international organisations want to do for Afghanistan,"³³ addressing the indecision of INGOs regarding the human rights situation in Afghanistan.

With regards to the situation of donors, Abdullah Ahmadi says: "Many donors are dazed, do not have specific programmes, many of their programmes were only half-implemented in Afghanistan, they need to redefine their programmes, some of them have shifted to humanitarian programmes."³⁴ It seems that some Afghan HRDs are waiting for INGOs, especially donor agencies, to re-align their Afghanistan programmes so that they can redefine their NGOs accordingly. As Rahim Jami puts it, "We are waiting for the INGOs to define their strategy in terms of Afghanistan and then we will refer to them."³⁵ He continues, "Our work depends on whether we find resources, the extent to which the environment allows us to work in Afghanistan, and the extent to which organisations and countries are committed to human rights values."³⁶ He goes on to say that everything is still suspended, except for some humanitarian and advocacy programmes.³⁷

On the other hand, some activists believe it is their responsibility to advocate for human rights in Afghanistan, regardless of INGOs and country support. Aziz Rafiee, for example, says:

*"Human rights [are] not a thesis of the West, [they are] the thesis of the Afghan people. The Afghan people need their human rights, they have the right to live as human beings and to be members of human society as human beings. This is a great task that all Afghan political and social leaders must face. Human rights are not an invention of the West, but the result of the great efforts of the people who have come to this point after millions of years. You cannot accept that the violation of human rights is okay in Afghanistan but must not happen in the United States. And every human being must be sensitive to human rights issues and must be committed to the cause of human rights."*³⁸

He refers to the responsibility of Afghan HRDs by saying those from Afghanistan should not wait for donors or INGOs to support them but should do something themselves about the human rights situation in Afghanistan. However, the question of the extent to which Afghan HRDs are able to advocate for human rights from exile without receiving funds and support from other organisations, remains unanswered.

It seems that donor agencies and INGOs tend to work with NGOs in-country and are unwilling to work with NGOs or human rights organisations outside Afghanistan. Human rights activists living in exile see this policy of donor organisations and INGOs as a challenge to their work. Donor agencies feel that exiled human rights

³³ Wadood Pedram, Canada, July 23, 2022

³⁴ Abdullah Ahmadi, France, July 22, 2022

³⁵ Mohammad Rahim Jami, Canada, July 27, 2022

³⁶ Mohammad Rahim Jami, Canada, July 27, 2022

³⁷ Mohammad Rahim Jami, Canada, July 27, 2022

³⁸ Aziz Rafiee, Canada, July 23, 2022

activists are out of touch with the grassroots issues and cannot engage with the situation in Afghanistan. When speaking with the two development agencies and some INGOs, they were cautious about working with HRDs in exile, emphasising instead that they are proud to work with NGOs in Afghanistan. Working with NGOs inside Afghanistan is a must, but there are some activities that cannot take place inside the country due to strict regulations by its de facto authorities.

The HRDs and people in Afghanistan do not have the opportunity to advocate, unlike the HRDs in exile, who have the opportunity to advocate for the opening of the Afghan civic space on different platforms in different countries, especially at the events of the UN Human Rights Council. Also, due to the severe restrictions and influence of the de facto authorities on some of the NGOs working in Afghanistan, people whose rights are being violated cannot rely on local NGOs to share their stories. They are more likely to trust HRDs who live outside Afghanistan and have access to INGOs to share their information.

So these are more the tasks of HRDs in exile: They can get valid information, analyse it, and easily disseminate it to various stakeholders. They can also monitor and report on human rights violations in Afghanistan and hold artistic events to keep the flame of human rights burning even when in exile. In addition, HRDs in exile have good opportunities to advocate for human rights. They can easily and openly participate in meetings and gatherings outside Afghanistan to put pressure on the de facto authorities there to change the human rights situation.

Some HRDs say that UNAMA is willing to work with NGOs in Afghanistan, despite some human rights activists believing these NGOs are designing their programmes in line with the de facto authorities' agenda, or with NGOs that do not believe in human rights and are more focused on humanitarian assistance. They believe UNAMA is willing to work with such NGOs as it would make UNAMA's job much easier because it would not be asking for things that would go against the de facto authorities' policy and get UNAMA in trouble.

These HRDs say these NGOs "have created alternative co-ordinating organisations in Afghanistan and keep telling us that we do not have a physical presence, and they hold meetings with UNAMA, and then UNAMA puts pressure on us,"³⁹ adding that their proposals are not seriously considered by UNAMA. These HRDs go on to say:

*"[NGOs in Afghanistan] do not sympathise with our human rights programmes and make excuses that [we] are putting [them] at risk. And because they can gain resources inside Afghanistan and appease the Taliban, they come and question our credibility and legitimacy. They have formed a similar kind of joint co-ordination group and they make statements and say that they are the representatives, but in their statements, they support the Taliban group."*⁴⁰

Basically, they maintain that some human rights activists and NGOs working in Afghanistan and receiving funds from donor agencies, and which are in contact with the de facto authorities in Afghanistan, are trying to discredit human rights activists and NGOs outside the country, and carry out activities that have nothing to do with human rights but rather benefit the de facto authorities. However, human rights activists and NGOs living in exile want

³⁹ Anonymous

⁴⁰ Anonymous

their voice and existence recognised outside the country as HRDs or NGOs for whom the human rights of the Afghan people are a priority.

3.1.3-Risks

It seems that the risks to HRDs do not leave them free to operate, whether they work inside or outside a country, as in the case of Afghan HRDs in exile, who are still afraid of the risks that threaten them and their colleagues, especially in Afghanistan by its de facto authorities. Because of this risk, some HRDs who still have colleagues working inside Afghanistan for the NGO cannot say or do certain activities publicly or on behalf of their organisation as they will put their colleagues in danger. Rahim Jami said some NGO members have refused to work on some projects because of these risks and dangers to their colleagues in Afghanistan. However, it is not only their colleagues in the field who are at risk but also the extended families of the HRDs themselves. In most cases, they self-censor and do not say anything or attend certain places or required meetings as HRDs because of the threat from the de facto authorities in Afghanistan. If the concerns of HRDs in these areas are not addressed, most of them will not participate in events and engage meaningfully in exile, and even if they do participate in or hold events, they may not publicise their efforts and work, which would negatively impact the effectiveness of the programme and activities. For instance, because of these risks, some HRDs who left their families behind in Afghanistan and had various interventions at the 50th and 51st UN sessions of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, were unable to share or even talk about their contributions on their own social media.

3.2-Process Challenges

This section discusses the challenges of operating an Afghan NGO inside and outside Afghanistan, and the types of challenges faced when they begin actual operations in exile.

3.2.1-Self-Censorship

Because of the threats from de facto authorities, human rights activists working outside Afghanistan censor some of their work, and sometimes try to advocate for human rights, but under a different name. Those who are doing something, even outside the country, do not want to be active on social media because of these threats to their colleagues or their extended families still in Afghanistan. Some human rights activists – I refrain from naming them and their organisations – still have colleagues in Afghanistan who are secretly working for human rights. They are working under names that do not get them turned over to the de facto authorities. Some HRDs said their colleagues in Afghanistan are also not working under their real names. The threats from the de facto authorities seem to be a serious challenge for HRDs as they may have platforms and opportunities in exile but they cannot work explicitly and show their results.

Aside from self-censorship, there was a case with Shahrbanu Haidari, working in Italy, who said HRDs have no room to manoeuvre in their activities as the Italian government has already set a series of activities or goals for which they must work. She said: "The Italian government has set a series of objectives for our association, and

we have to choose from these proposed objectives and define our activities based on them,"⁴¹ which limits the work of HRDs in exile.

3.2.2-Taliban Pressure

HRDs believe that the de facto authorities significantly hinder the work of NGOs in Afghanistan by presenting them with many challenges and obstacles and exerting influence over their activities. This was one of the biggest challenges for the Afghan HRDs, as almost all of them had something to say about this issue. One of them said that "the Taliban interferes in the work of foreign NGOs by saying that they consider certain provinces and certain people"⁴² and try to channel aid to their sympathisers and people and places close to them.⁴³ In discussions with HRDs inside and outside the country, they said the Taliban also put pressure on old NGOs to have their directors in the country and try to expel directors who are in exile.

Freshta Karim, who works for children's rights, particularly their right to education, and runs several mobile libraries in Afghanistan, shared her concerns about developing content for children. She says, "The challenge is to design our content in a way that the content, the impact, and our approach are not full of tensions."⁴⁴ She struggles to produce content that adheres to scientific principles while taking into account the ideology of the de facto authorities and their potential reaction to the content and programmes.

According to HRDs, the Taliban seems to regard the non-aligned NGOs as a de facto foreign offshoot in Afghanistan and a substitute for missing money, but at the same time the group recognises that a large amount of money comes into the country through the NGOs, so it necessarily tolerates this situation. HRDs say that the de facto authorities have been unable to ban NGOs in Afghanistan and have therefore resorted to strategies to monetize the presence of NGOs in the country, support NGOs that sympathize with them, and establish NGOs themselves.⁴⁵ According to them, the Taliban exerts its influence on the distribution and detour of national and international humanitarian aid in the country not only through the detour of aid, but also through the systematic detour of projects and programs initiated by NGOs, and when the Taliban cannot divert a project or aid, they require NGOs to recruit staff for the projects or within NGO structures from their own ranks.

As reported by some news outlets, de facto authorities in some provinces have officially ordered NGOs not to hire staff without their observation. If implemented throughout the country, this could be a step towards monopolisation and Talibanisation of the NGO sector in Afghanistan. Recently, all women have been banned from working in government offices, and in local and international NGOs in Afghanistan, which is a graphic example of discrimination against women in that country.

3.2.3- Sustainability

HRDs are afraid that they cannot continue to work like other NGOs in their countries of exile, which do not have the challenges and obstacles they face. For example, Horia Mosadiq says, "The organisations that are

⁴¹ Shahrbanu Haidari, Italy, August 03, 2022

⁴² Anonymous

⁴³ Anonymous

⁴⁴ Freshta Karim, UK, August 25, 2022

⁴⁵ Anonymous

already working in these countries have worked for years and it takes a lot of time to adapt and be accepted in the new environment, which is a challenge for us."⁴⁶ She adds that they would need a lot of time to rebuild an NGO and gain the trust of donors and convince them that the work they are doing in exile is relevant to the human rights situation in Afghanistan. Khalil Raufi, director of the Civil Society and Human Rights Activists Network, also points out this challenge, saying: "We do not have the capacity to compete with the established NGOs,"⁴⁷ and acknowledging that it is difficult to be regarded as recognised NGOs that advocate for human rights and, most importantly, continue their work from exile.

In most cases, the challenge of NGOs' sustainability keeps them from rebuilding their organisations and working for human rights from exile, as they are not sure what would happen in the near future if they resumed their work. Because they are not sure if they will receive funding for long-term projects, they are hesitant to work as the donor organisations cannot or will not promise them long-term co-operation. Apart from that, there are some donor organisations that only fund the newly established organisations for some short-term projects, often aimed at helping them restructure their organisations, which is not considered a sustainable solution by the HRDs. Rather, they are concerned that employees who have already had their benefits cut by the state will still be unemployed after the project is completed and will struggle to find a job or receive assistance from the state.

3.3-Output Challenges

This section discusses the changes in the objectives and results of an operation and the possibility of achieving these objectives from exile.

3.3.1-Existential Questions

After the collapse of Afghanistan at the hands of the Taliban and the disintegration of governmental and NGOs, as well as the relocation of HRDs to various countries, some HRDs have begun to question their existence as HRDs and as an organisation.

Freshta Karim, the head of Charmaghz, questions her organisation's dependence on donations, saying, "This would lead people to believe that [Afghans] cannot help themselves and must always be dependent,"⁴⁸ which she believes is detrimental to a nation's self-esteem. She continues:

"After the return of the Taliban, big questions were asked again about everything. We believed that children needed literacy, but now the question is what kind of literacy they need. Should we continue with the education system that was not made by us and for us, or should we change the philosophy of our education?"⁴⁹

HRDs question the value and effectiveness of the goals they have worked for over the past few years. They wonder if it is worth holding on to these goals, especially in exile, or if they need to rethink those goals and, if they want to replace them, what kinds of goals are valuable and feasible. Given the drastic change in

⁴⁶ Horia Mosadiq, UK, July 27, 2022

⁴⁷ Khalil Raufi, Canada, July 30, 2022

⁴⁸ Freshta Karim, UK, August 25, 2022

⁴⁹ Freshta Karim, UK, August 25, 2022

Afghanistan and the disappearance of all values in the blink of an eye – and the fact that the international community seems to have forgotten the value of human rights and what the people of Afghanistan, especially women and girls, are going through – HRDs are questioning the value of their entire organisation. In the face of all the negative events happening every day in Afghanistan, and the pessimistic atmosphere hanging over the country and its human rights activists, they wonder if they should continue, and if so, at what cost and with what hope.

3.3.2-Developing a New Strategy

Developing a new strategy has been one of the biggest challenges for Afghan HRDs in exile. As many considerations regarding a strategy have remained unclear, it is not easy to swiftly decide on the type of intervention and/or the goals of their NGOs. Most of them wrestle with the issues they need to consider in their new strategy, such as the future of the de facto authorities in Afghanistan; changes in their programmes and focus; the situation of HRDs in exile; the attitude of donor agencies towards HRDs in exile; access to funding; understanding their role while in exile; understanding the laws and procedures in their host countries; finding their niche as human rights NGOs while in exile; and understanding their scope of work.

In addition, questions about change, brands, internationalisation, and many other issues have made them hold back on developing a strategy. Some of them have limited the scope of their organisation's activities to humanitarian assistance to the Afghan people. The future of the Taliban as the de facto authority; the situation of HRDs in exile; and the ambiguity of states' and INGOs' policies are the main reasons for their hesitation in developing a new strategy.

With these issues in mind, Mary Akrami says that: "Developing a new strategy is time-consuming, it all depends on time; first, we need to determine what the de facto authorities are like, then we can think about where it is necessary to work, where the de facto authorities use extremism, where they can work and where you can change their method."⁵⁰

Mary Akrami's NGO used to advocate for peace, security, and women's rights. Given the current situation, it can no longer advocate for these and has decided on a strategy to help it implement projects. She says, "We were forced to make changes and the change we made is how women can implement projects, how they can be accepted by the Ministry of Economy, and how donors accept them."⁵¹ Considering these issues, Wadood Pedram sees it as a challenge to continue pursuing previous goals, noting that: "It is a serious challenge to stick to the previous goals because the international community is paying less attention and the current regime does not understand these things."⁵² He refers to the certainty of the de facto authorities in Afghanistan about human rights activities and, at the same time, the ambiguity and uncertainty of INGOs and donor organisations about the situation.

However, Abdullah Ahmadi says the main change in strategy is that HRDs and NGOs used to be in Afghanistan, working on the ground, but are now in exile, so he says, "We are now focusing on the digital space and the social media platforms, and our target group is those who use these means." On the other hand, Aziz Rafiee says, "Because of the danger, we have changed our strategy and focused on humanitarian and poverty-

⁴⁴ Mary Akrami, US, August 27, 2022

⁵¹ Mary Akrami, US, August 27, 2022

⁵² Wadood Pedram, Canada, July 23, 2022

reduction activities."⁵³ He also says that the change in strategy required an office outside the country and, given the situation, HRDs can no longer work in the field of rule of law, so they added a new element to their strategy, which is human rights monitoring. For many NGOs, however, this change is not that easy as they are not able to move from one area to another one where they have not worked before. Wadood Pedram, for example, says that his NGO used to work with policymakers and policy changes but now they no longer work with them or in that area. He wonders how to adapt his NGO to the new environment.

4-Operational Opportunities

This section is about the opportunities Afghan HRDs have to champion their cause and achieve their goals.

4.1-Monitoring and Documentation

After the Taliban takeover, massive human rights violations occurred in Afghanistan, most of which went unobserved and undocumented due to a lack of accountability mechanisms, access to information, and threats from the Taliban. However, Afghan HRDs in exile have the opportunity to monitor the situation and document the human rights violations committed by the perpetrators. They believe that victims of human rights violations in Afghanistan consider them more trustworthy than organisations working in the country and are more likely to turn to them than to local NGOs when they want to share sensitive information. They can also be of help to INGOs by creating a model to receive information from the country, review and analyse it, then disseminate the results of their analysis to various stakeholders in exile.

That is what the NGOs in Afghanistan cannot do due to the severe restrictions imposed by the de facto authorities. They cannot research and monitor the cases, nor can they publish their findings. Therefore, HRDs living in exile believe that this vacuum should be filled by NGOs also in exile, and that any kind of human rights violation should be documented and preserved. In addition to documenting human rights abuses, they can take an immediate stand on these abuses in Afghanistan by publishing position papers, statements and news reports, and by strategically using the media to mobilise public opinion inside and outside the country. Human rights activists believe that conducting these activities would lead to preventing human rights abuses and holding perpetrators accountable.

4.2-Art

HRDs believe they can also use various artistic events, such as poetry readings, theater, films, music, exhibitions, and more, to reflect what is being forced upon the Afghan people and to pressure the international community to take meaningful actions to restore the rights and freedom of the people of Afghanistan.. Living in exile can provide an opportunity for HRDs to shine a light on their cause through artistic events to raise global

⁵³ Aziz Rafiee, Canada, July 23, 2022

awareness of the human rights situation in Afghanistan and consequently mobilize people and the international community to change the situation in the country. HRDs also see art as a way to put Afghanistan on the international agenda and keep the flame of human rights and freedom alive for Afghanistan, so that the country is not forgotten again by the international community and then “rediscovered” after a few years.

4.3-Advocacy

Most HRDs consider advocacy an important task while in exile. They believe that advocacy is lacking in Afghanistan and see exile as a good opportunity to advocate for human rights change in that country. While they believe that, "the resettlement of Afghan HRDs provides an opportunity to establish themselves as an advocacy group"⁵⁴ and that they have access to different stakeholders in different countries and can use their presence to shape INGO and country policies in line with the human rights situation in Afghanistan, they also believe that INGOs need to help them join together and form advocacy groups or movements.

Abdullah Ahmadi believes that: "If there is meaningful solidarity and co-ordination between HRDs and human rights organisations, they can form and be effective as a large international movement focused on Afghanistan." He goes on to say: "It would be very good if INGOs could help Afghan organisations co-ordinate, build capacity, and establish networks."⁵⁵ Therefore, HRDs in exile believe they should be assisted in registering their NGOs outside Afghanistan so they can engage in activities which NGOs inside that country are not allowed to engage in.

Since the collapse of Afghanistan, NGOs operating inside that country cannot conduct activities to research, monitor and document human rights violations, nor can they advocate for change. In other words, civic space is severely limited in Afghanistan as people are not allowed to freely assemble and express their opinions. Therefore, the vacuum of active civil society in the country must be filled by supporting HRDs in exile so that they can keep up the pressure on the de facto authorities until the civic space in Afghanistan opens up again and women and men can stand up for their rights and freedom themselves.

⁵⁴ Horia Mosadiq, UK, July 27, 2022

⁵⁵ Abdullah Ahmadi, France, July 22, 2022

5-Conclusion

After the fall of Kabul into the hands of the Taliban on 15 August 2021, and due to threats against HRDs and their families, many HRDs were evacuated and relocated to different countries, mainly within Europe, the UK, the US and Canada. Despite various challenges, Afghan HRDs have the opportunity to rebuild themselves and their NGOs in exile and to advocate for human rights from their host countries. They see the support of INGOs and donor agencies and, more importantly, the conditions under which they can unite and form an advocacy movement or group, as well as the ability to monitor and document human rights violations in Afghanistan, as the opportunities that lie ahead of them in exile.

They have the trust of people in Afghanistan, especially those who have been victims of the de facto authorities and whose rights have been violated, and who prefer to share their information with exiled HRDs and not with the NGOs still working in Afghanistan. This gives them the opportunity to monitor and document cases, hold artistic events, and advocate for individuals and the whole of Afghanistan. Most exiled HRDs bring with them extensive experience gained over the past 20 years working with national and international organisations in Afghanistan. They are rife with potential: they know the Afghan context, and they have the ability to observe and document the human rights situation in that country, and advocate for change, while in exile. However, to do so, they need financial and technical support to restructure themselves and work with INGOs that are committed to helping Afghanistan. If they receive support and work for human rights, they can work not only for the current situation but also for the future when the situation improves and HRDs can return to the country and continue their work there. In this case, they would return to Afghanistan as a united and skilled force and would be able to have an effective impact on the restructuring of laws and policies.

However, if HRDs do not receive the necessary support from INGOs and donor agencies and cannot restructure themselves into NGOs while in exile, they are more likely to engage in other areas of life and their expertise acquired over the past two decades will be wasted, which is not only a waste of expertise for Afghanistan but also a waste of the resources that donor countries have spent over the past 20 years. And, if the situation in Afghanistan were to improve, there would be no potential force with the knowledge and know-how to go into the country and challenge the traditional forces and influence policy and law as an interest group. Therefore, exiled HRDs and NGOs must be supported in one way or another, such as through a fiscal sponsorship initiative and/or secondment system, until they can re-establish themselves and operate independently.

Part Two: Recommendations

A. For Exiled Afghan HRDs

1. Create a mechanism for co-ordination among exiled HRDs to ensure meaningful collaboration with the different INGOs, the mechanisms of UN, and especially the Office of the Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Afghanistan. And to ensure that initiatives are not duplicative and that they are inclusive, transparent, and accountable to achieve appropriate legitimacy and effectiveness-and to ensure that the end results of all initiatives reach the Afghan people.
2. Identify thematic focal points in specific countries or regions under a defined mechanism for holding events, co-ordinating, fundraising, and improving access to information on HRDs living and available in exile.
3. Take advantage of opportunities to collaborate with exiled HRDs from other, similar countries to explore different ways of working while in exile, including but not limited to monitoring, documentation and advocacy, with the least possible risk of further exile.

B. To Donor Agencies and INGOs

1. Recognise the institutional capacity and local knowledge of Afghan NGOs and act as a fiscal sponsor for one or two Afghan NGOs as implementing partners for one to two years.
2. Set up a secondment system whereby certain staff from more established INGOs are assigned (virtually or in person) to an Afghan NGO to provide technical assistance and advice. And/or recruit one or two Afghan NGO staff members to an INGO through a fellowship programme so they can work on the organisational development of their own NGO.
3. Initiate a donor conference to explore how to address the human rights situation from exile and to financially support exiled HRDs and their NGOs. Additionally, host a large, multi-day conference to extensively explore opportunities for collaboration with exiled Afghan HRDs, NGOs, and CSOs outside Afghanistan.
4. Provide opportunities for exiled HRDs to experience the work environment and culture in host countries by offering part-time internships and fellowship programmes in various organisations. Additionally, host online and offline training workshops in digital security, fundraising, organisational development, networking, communication and advocacy to help HRDs improve their professional skills.

5. Provide NGOs in exile with core or long-term funding to establish themselves and retain their staff while in exile. Furthermore, support them in monitoring and documenting human rights violations, such as war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, torture, summary killings, and the diversion of humanitarian aid.
6. Recruit exiled Afghan HRDs to INGOs' Afghanistan units and programmes, and use their local knowledge to ensure that key programmes are prioritised and relevant to real people's problems. Additionally, revise the strategic plans for Afghanistan considering the current situation and include exiled HRDs and NGOs as relevant stakeholders and human rights change agents.

C. To States

1. Grant residence permits to exiled Afghan HRDs whose legal status is unclear so they can continue their work and run NGOs. Additionally, evacuate family members of HRDs at risk in Afghanistan and give them priority in evacuation programmes.
2. Provide psychological services for HRDs traumatised by the shock of the fall of Afghanistan to help them overcome challenges and become more psychologically resilient.
3. Create flexible ways for Afghan HRDs to register their NGOs in exile, including but not limited to opening a bank account and easily transferring money to and from Afghanistan, and outside Afghanistan, based on a specific mechanism.
4. Create appropriate legal and practical conditions for HRDs, such as the smooth issuance of visas, so they can easily participate in human rights events outside the host country and continue their activism, and ensure their language and vocational schools allow them to do so.

D. To UNAMA in Afghanistan

1. Put meaningful pressure on the de facto authorities in Afghanistan to allow exiled HRDs easy access to their frozen personal and organisations' bank accounts.
2. Ensure that de facto authorities in Afghanistan do not interfere in NGOs' activities and/or attempt to monopolise CSOs. Furthermore, ensure that funds from the various agencies of the UN do not support NGOs sponsored by the de facto authorities and/or NGOs associated with their sympathisers.

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