



The Role of Civil Society in Local Governance and Service Delivery: An Analysis of Local Government System of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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Abstract

The concept of civility and civil society has its roots in ancient societies and it has been recognized an important mechanism for development and service delivery across the world. Civil society refers to the process and network through which groups, organizations and individuals negotiate, argue, struggle against, or agree with political and economic administration. Civil society engages people and communities and provides them a platform where they can directly or indirectly analyze and criticize the existing institutions and service delivery system and usually takes step to improve it. Civil society provides a setting and action taking place that aspire and represents people and create an alternative for groups, communities and unions in this postmodern world. This study aims at exploring the role of civil society in local governance particularly service delivery in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The study was carried out in three districts including Abbottabad, Charsadda and Dir Upper of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Primary data was collected from a sample of 30 respondents representing different categories i.e. local government officials, elected representatives, civil society activists and general community. Further, data was collected through semi-structured interview, using interview guide, while the selection of sample was made conveniently. The data was passed through different phases and a thematic discussion was generated to clarify the study under question, derive findings and conclusion. The study concludes that civil society plays a vital role in local governance and it has been an integral tool for promoting service delivery.

Keywords: Local Governance, Civil Society, Transformation, Common Interests, Service Delivery, Community Inclusion

1. Introduction

Civil society is a feature of postmodern globalized world and link different groups and actions within states. In recent years the role of civil society has been widely recognized and its scope and operations have been extended beyond national frontiers. Civil society have increasingly become a force within states and societies and dynamically involved in interconnected social, economic and political institutions (Kaldor 2007; Smith and West 2005). Civil society usually consists of thick or thin social networks, groups, organizations and hub of spoken clusters with deliberate objectives. Around the globe, the effects of civil society are felt far and wide from international to local areas. Literately explanation indicate that in its nature and functions civil society is non-governmental, constituted of interconnected social processes, oriented to non-violence, pluralistic in nature and are based on certain objective or objectives (Keane, 2003). Civil society is distinct as well as connected to the economic market and nation states, however; it is deeply connected to local governance and promoting service delivery in a particular region or locality.

Before the advent of theories of minimum state, limited governance, neo liberalism and new public management, state and government were considered synonymous. Government was considered institutional embodiment of state and a dominant political and legal decision maker (Rondinelli, Cheema, 1983). With the emergence of new public management model, the nature of state and governance has changed. The New Public Management movement in 1990s stressed on decentralization, customer-driven model of governance and service delivery, growing role for civil society, local groups and participation (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992). With these reforms, government has been transformed into governance. This shift was due to new wave of democracy in third world and deepening of democracy within developed world. In this shift from government to governance, new actors like civil society, private sectors equally interact with government in a transparent and participatory manner (Cheema, 2011). These trends have changed the contours and nature of local government as well. Since long local government institutions have existed along with national governments. However, the concept of decentralization, local governance is a recent phenomenon (Rondinelli, Cheema, 1983).

Generally independent from traditional government control a civil society consists of an independent institutionalized structure and actively engaged in promoting democracy, peace and justice, advocating human rights and actively engaging in local governance and service delivery mechanism through their networks (Alexander 2006). The process of globalization and increasing integration and interdependence among nations have made the world a global village and have extended the scope of civil society and also resulted in emergence of

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transnational networks. As a network civil society has particularly grown after 1990s mostly in western world as response to many maladies i.e. governance issues, deficiencies of growing individualism, decline of community and increase in consumerism (Kenny, 2020). In this context, civil society was recognized as a link and a kind of reconciliation between self-interest and public interest, individualism and community, public and private domain and concept of freedom and social solidarity. The transformation from government to governance and emergence of local governance has increased the significance and role of civil society and it has been emerged as a distant third important sector in modern world.

The traditional form of governance and state apparatus could not be sustained for long time and with the passage of time crisis emerged within democracy, increasing debt burden and failure of welfare state became unsustainable. In addition, inefficiency, bad governance and absence of local governance were the hallmark that attracted the attention of reformers and policy advocates raised their voice against the prevailing situation. Also, stress was laid upon bottom-up approach instead of top down approach, creating entrepreneur spirit in public sector, treating of citizens and customers and stress on management, instead of administration. This resulted in emergence of civil society to appreciate pluralism instead of profit making, to pursue common interests instead of private interests, to promote participation and active engagement of citizens. Focusing these aspects, civil society often involved in advocacy and policy analysis, accountability and monitoring of government and public officials, promotion of civic norms, awareness, democratic practices, formation of social capital and building capacities of citizens to articulate their interests, mobilization for marginalized and vulnerable masses (Pasha, 2005).

1.1. Study Rationale

The concept of local government or governance is widely prevalent across the world and it has been recognized as a vital tool of local development. The global development of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also stresses local governance wherein community involvement and citizen engagement was made an integral part of global development. However; it is widely claimed that local governance is also susceptible to elite class as are they more organized, aware and have sufficient financial resources and social networks that connects them with high level politician and bureaucracy. This questions the overall benefits of local governance and calls for motivation, organization and participation of local communities in local governance issues and development. In this regard, civil society plays an important role in promoting citizen participation and civic engagement for local decision making and development. This would facilitate localization of SDGs i.e. identification, definition, implementation and monitoring at local level and would result in development of strong and functional local government characterized by accountability, efficiency, service delivery and civic engagement. The present study was conducted in three Districts i.e. Abbottabad, Charsadda and Dir Upper of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan to explore the role and significance of civil society in local governance and service delivery, however; the study was focusing on the following specific objectives:

1.2. Objectives of the Study

The study was based upon the following objectives:

- To know about the prevalence of local governance and civil society in the targeted areas
- The find out the opportunities and role of civil societies in local governance and service delivery
- To explore different challenges faced by civil society in interacting with local bodies and bureaucracy

2. Methods and Procedures

The present study was conducted utilizing qualitative research design. Qualitative research design was appropriate because it is built upon respondents experiences and helps in in-depth understanding of the study under investigation. The study was conducted in three Districts i.e. Abbottabad, Charsadda and Dir Upper of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Primary data was collected from a sample of 30 respondents representing four different categories i.e. local government representatives, members of civil society, community members and government officials. The categorization of respondents helped in data triangulation and enabled us to collect in-depth information about the study under question. Primary data was collected through interview using interview guide, while the selection of sample was made conveniently. The collected information was passed through different phases and was analyzed qualitatively to uncover and clarify the issue, derive study findings and conclusion. Although, the issue was not sensitive in nature, however; for maintaining anonymity of the respondents' codes instead names were used in data analysis section. The coding formula was prepared in such a way that first and second character represents interview number, third was used for first alphabet of district, fourth and fifth was used for category of respondents and finally sixth and seventh represents age of respondents.

Example: 37-DER48 \implies 37= Interview No, D= Dir, ER= Elected Representative, 48= Age

3. Themes Identification Process

Interviews are generally utilized for data collection in qualitative research. The next phase is interpretation of the collected data and identification of different themes/categories and analysis. In this regard, thematic analysis is a popularly used technique for analysis in qualitative research (Guest, Namey, & Chen, 2020), wherein different themes are identified across the collected data after reading and proper transcription of the interviews (Kellehear, & Gliksmann, 1997). Thematic analysis is helpful in capturing the complicated aspects of the information (Guest, 2012), and it provides link of the study with study purpose and objectives, provide an accurate picture of the issue under research and helps in deriving study findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The present study aims at exploring the role of civil society in local governance and service delivery in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Primary information was gathered through interview and after transcription the following themes were identified for discussion following Braun & Clark (2006) six steps thematic research model.

Table 1

Different Themes
Civil Society and Government System, Issues and Opportunities
Civil Society, Local Governance and Service Delivery
Civil societies, Threats and Challenges

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Civil Society and Local Government System: Issues and Opportunities

Pakistan has remained a security state for decades and if stern action were not taken it would remain so in future. In Pakistan, security thinking usually dominates the national narrative, while political freedoms and social activism are viewed with doubt and suspicions. It has not been our national priority to work for development of human resource and empower local communities. It is difficult for local governance and civil society to grow in such suffocating environment. After the war on terror, scrutiny of NGOs has further been tightened, some are blacklisted and registration of many is cancelled. Since 1980, KP has remained a frontline province first in jihad against Soviet Union and later against war on terror. For practical purpose, it has remained operational areas with active and sizeable presence of army and intelligence agencies. There are very strict rules/guidelines for issuance of NOCs for NGOs and their activities are monitored and scrutinized on daily basis. Although, civil society and local government system are interdependent however; such institutional and structural impediments had created enormous complication for them and has made it difficult to perform their roles. In this regards, field information also indicate similar results and a respondent explained that:

“Government is also discouraging the working of non-governmental organizations through complex registration procedure and unnecessary verifications. Many local NGOs have become dormant because of unsupportive and discouraging environment. The involvement of an NGO (Save the Children) in tracking Osama Bin Ladin in Abbottabad has further increased the suspicions of security agencies” (I-DCS45)

While sharing his views on civil societies, local governance and their issues and opportunities another respondent highlighted the role of civil society in local governance and told that inclusion of the role of civil society was required in 2013 KP LG Act. He was optimistic about the role of civil society. An extract from interview:

“Role of civil society is very important in strengthening of local governments. Now, the civil society is much educated in political arena however; there is need of more awareness. The civil society has vigorously participated in local community projects which have developed the community but have not yet reached a level that could build pressure on the provincial govt: to devolve the financial and administrative authority to the local level and ensure conduction of LG elections on time. In LG system 2001 there was a concept of CCB, funds were also allocated for the purpose, whereas, there was no concept of engaging the civil society. In 2013 LGA systems and no funds were allocated for awareness / engaging the civil society” (12-DEL50).

In this context, another respondent also shared similar views and expressed that civil society could play and important role in local government system. He was contended that if civil society was properly incorporated into development agenda they will make positive contribution towards local governance. He explained that:

“NGOs played an important role in local government, because they have mobilized communities, formed their organizations at hamlet, village and UC levels and created awareness among them. In most cases he observed that the members of community organizations, village organizations, and union councils organization (LSO) were elected in local government system as Chairman of VC, Kisan Counselor, Youth Counselor, Nazims and Naib Nazims. I have worked with UNDP/RAHA in Dir Lower on community mobilization and more than 20 members of the community organization were elected in LG system on different seats” (07-DCM38).

According to National Reconstruction Bureau NRB (2001), different NGOs were consulted during formulation of devolution plan and the original plan was very comprehensive and integrated one. The objectives of devolution were to decentralize and restructure the bureaucratic and the administrative set up to the district level and below, to create space for public participation, to create an integrated system for service delivery and to create space for proactive role of civil society (NRB Report, 2001). In this connection a respondent uttered:

“Though concept of CCBs was introduced in devolution plan 2000, and consequently many NGOs were registered at each level by the social welfare department. Still there has been no formal mechanism for involving NGOs in Local Government Ordinance of 2000 as well as LG Act 2013. She was of the opinion that different NGOs are still working closely with the NRB and the Local Government machinery including the Local Governance School of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa” (14-CGO39).

While sharing her opinion about civil society another respondent explained that civil society is equally important pillar of the state and these civil societies contribute to the socioeconomic development of a country. He expressed his sorrow that despite their positive role in developing societies like us civil societies are discouraged both by and society. An extract from interview:

“Civil society should be treated as important pillar of our society besides Administration, Judiciary, Media and Legislature. The misperception about NGOs shall be reduced because all NGOs are not working against the culture of the community. Mostly local people are working in these NGOs and they have devotion to the country and local community. He highlighted the important role of civil society in local governance and development” (21-DCS45).

Another respondent added:

“For promotion of democracy better understanding of the role of NGOs/civil society is necessary. Although there exist several misconceptions about NGOs, however; it is necessary to understand that the role of NGOs is extending charity and support to the vulnerable people, promoting development, advocating and influencing policies, budgets and formulation of law. I suggest creation of an enabling environment and regulatory framework for NGOs without creating overwhelming hurdles and complications” (17-AER52).

4.2. Civil Society, Local Governance and Service Delivery

The debate from government to governance, from public administration to public management, involvement of the other actors in managing the affairs of the state is relevant and more applicable at national and local level. The role of CSO and citizen participation in local governance is very essential and its active participation not only strengthens the relationship between but also promotes their participation in decision making and ensures service delivery. The role of civil society is critical in local governance. It provides a platform for creating awareness among the people. In addition, the civil societies work on advocacy, promote human rights, resist violence and work for tolerance, mutual harmony, and promotion of peace (Rosenbaum, 2006). The study also found similar results and excessive number of respondents were of the opinion that civil society is an important forum for promotion of communal interests and providing citizens a platform for discussing their needs and priorities. A respondent stated that:

“It is difficult to ignore the role of civil society in this postmodern world. Civil society provides vital platform for advocating and contesting for citizen rights. It is an important pillar in service delivery system at grass roots level and a helpful tool for strengthening local governance” (20-CLG43).

Likewise, the close association of civil societies and public sector is indispensable because public sector developmental spending does not operate in isolation. In this way civil society play an integral part in human development. Civil societies identify different local through various community mobilization and participatory approaches. These local needs and demands are formalized and prioritized in different social gatherings, awareness dialogues and seminars and finally developmental projects are approved on basis of these demands raised by civil society. In recent past it has been made compulsory under local government that developmental projects would be identified collectively by the community in the meeting primarily conducted under the umbrella of civil society. Field information also indicated the role of civil society in mobilizing communities for identification, prioritization and implementation of their needs through service providers. While sharing his experiences a respondent told that:

“In its essence and spirit civil society works for promoting service delivery. In my opinion civil society works as a facilitator of the local service providers (line departments) in accessing and addressing community needs in a better way. In fact, the local government institutions translate the agenda of civil societies and spend their developmental budget in close consultation with the civil society” (25-ALG54).

Platteau and Gaspart, (2004) argue that local government is very susceptible to elite capture, corrupt practices, resources capture and manipulation. Local elite, political parties and their representatives usually take advantage of disorganized communities at grass roots level. The civil society organizes local communities into a whole; create awareness among them for voicing their demands and fulfilling these through public sector. Jutting et al. (2004),

argue that factors like strong civil society, opportunities for the public to access important information, involvement of the community in the decision-making process, have positive impacts on poverty reduction and results in local service delivery. On contrary, decision-making process dominated by local elites with low participation of poor and vulnerable communities, often proves counter-productive (Baiochi, Heller, Silva, & Silva, 2011). Similar views were also shared by respondents during field data collection. An extract from interview:

“The civil societies are not independent from the influence of local elite and political parties. They often take advantage of their close relationship with bureaucracy and the less organized communities. They often manipulate and exploit the agenda of civil society and turn it in their own favor. In some instances civil society is further strengthening the elite class and fulfilling their interests. The poor people are not properly participated in decision making and funds spending rather the elite and civil societies utilized them for their vested interests and their participation is limited to documentation” (27-DCM37).

(UNDP, 2016) argues that along-with other key actors at local level such as local governments, decentralized sectors, community based organizations; civil society organizations are integral part of local governance and promote service delivery. In this context, the World Bank (2003) in its integrated framework reported that CSOs provides significant functions in local development and better service delivery. Prior to 2000 devolution plan, local government system of Pakistan had no such provisions of involvement of civil society. Local government councils were established to implement and execute development schemes and they provided narrow municipal services. In Devolution Plan of 2000, long-with other reforms, participation of CSO was ensured and Social Welfare Department was devolved to the districts and empowered to register NGOs at district level. This resulted in registration of huge number of NGOs at local level and they actively participated in development of local communities. This was a revolutionary step towards community empowerment as they were actively involved in identification, implementation and monitoring of local developmental schemes. Massive community participation break the monopoly of elites and public works executing agencies, minimize the corruption, reduced delay and established an atmosphere of accountability thus paving the ground for a truly sustainable development (NRB, 2000).

4.3. Civil Societies, Threats and Challenges

Historically Pakistan has been a security state and civil societies have faced and are constantly facing several threats and challenges. Since 1980s the security situation in Pakistan has not been very satisfactory and numerous incidences have been witnessed and reported across Pakistan in which civil society members are killed, kidnapped, disappeared or threatened. The security situation in Afghanistan and our close connection with FATA has also intensified the challenges for civil society organizations. The Afghan Jihad and later war on terror have changed the social fabric and religious dynamic of entire Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The increase in religious intolerance and rise of extremism and the incidence of 9/11 has resulted in emergence of militant groups which engulfed the entire state particularly Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA region. In wake of these happening certain policies were adopted to regulate NGOs, tighten their scrutiny and introduce/maintain a complicated process of NGOs registration. This has made the environment suffocating for NGOs and made their operations difficult. A respondent explained that:

“Working in NGOs has always been a challenging task in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. After Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the incidence of 9/11 has further aggravated the situation and multiplied the threats and challenges. The involvement of NGO (Save the Children) in tracking Osama Bin Ladin in Abbottabad has further increased the suspicions of security agencies” (26-DCS45).

Similarly, during 2007 different militants group got united under the umbrella of Tehrik Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and started a new wave of terror in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. TTP was hardly opposed to NGOs and they were against their working in different sectors. They have threatened them, kidnapped them and killed many members of different NGOs. A respondent in a very pessimistic tune expressed that:

“Vested interests increase personal insecurity of people who work for NGOs. In KP, for example, the office of Plan International was attacked in 2008 and 3-4 of its staff members were killed. Since 2015, new regulations and changing security situations have made working for NGOs difficult and development interventions are more difficult and challenging” (13-CCS33).

Further, NGOs also face a tough challenge of social acceptability and certain negative perceptions and propaganda also prevail against them. Jamal & Baldwin (2019) in their study on community perception of NGO in Pashtun regions argue that NGOs are perceived with suspicions doubt and they are recognized foreign agents contradicting local cultural and religious values. Moreover, NGO are blamed for spreading western culture, immorality and it is believed that there exists wide corruption and lack of transparency within NGO sector. One of the participants who have worked in this sector for almost a decade was of the view that:

“Situation in KP is very unfriendly toward CSOs. The very name of NGOs has negative connotations and they are viewed as working against the teaching of Islam, sponsored by West to destabilize the Islamic social systems. The particular role of NGOs for gender parity and women empowerment is much detested. Mostly, religious leaders are against them and preaching against them in sermons. The Pakhtun culture is very much possessive about status of women and hence NGOs are facing tough challenges. Working environment for female workers is very challenging and full of threats. They are facing challenges from the family members, neighbors and general community and they are unable to work openly. They are often the frontline victims of attacks and harassment” (11-CS38).

In this context another participant shared her experiences and explained that:

“There are range negative perceptions about NGOs in our society. It is said that working in NGOs for obtaining big salaries & bigger cars and nothing more. However; she also told that all people are not against NGOs and certain segments of society have positive opinions about NGOs and facilitate them in their working as well. These people consider NGOs as poverty reducing agents and forums for advocacy of public needs and spaces for community participation and empowerment. Some people also recognize the services of NGOs particularly during disasters like the 2005 earthquake and 2010 floods, etc. In most cases, negativity against such NGOs is propagated by groups whose interests are threatened by the work of NGOs” (29-CER-49).

Security environment and negative perception about NGOs are not the only challenges. There are some major issues within NGOs itself. This sector is very nascent and has recently emerged and it is very difficult to evolve in such a short time and shoulder huge and complex responsibilities of public service. Besides, there are many challenges like capacities issues, lack of interest in real issues, misplaced priorities, and lack of understanding of local cultural sensitivities. According to Zaidi (2005) Mostly NGOs have defended military rulers as against the democratic regime. This has tarnished the image of CSO as some of reputed NGOs became supporter of Musharraf with justification that he was more liberal, efficient than other democratic political government. There is a vacuum of genuine local CSO which has been filled by international NGOs and usually created issues. In addition, civil societies mostly consist of middle class who are only interested in promotion of self-interest by capturing their stake and narrow economic interests in state. One participant was of the opinion that:

“The role of NGOs has been little in District Dir Upper. They are not interested in real issue of service delivery and improving infrastructure. They lack the capacity to implement huge projects, instead, they are interested in few catchy words and seem to advance Western agenda. They are also involved in corrupt practices and are very influential in silencing the voices of those who are criticizing them” (4-DER61).

Similar views were expressed by another participant:

“Some of these NGOs are capacitated having learned staff and good activities. But at large it has become more a business and less a development endeavor. No doubt they have transformed societies in fields like education, health and hygiene; infrastructure, population education and gender, but they have also created certain negative trends in society” (30-AER47).

Conclusively, civil societies face enormous institutional and structural challenges in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Born and socialized in a particular way the community cherish religious and cultural values that are recognized in direct contract to civil society and their working agenda. The security situation has also been a constant challenge for civil society to continue their operations and in most instances working for them is a life and death situation and challenge.

5. Conclusion

Civil society has been an important platform for the socioeconomic uplift of local communities and plays a vital role in local governance. Although, civil society has played important role in local development and it is difficult to ignore the role of civil society in integrating local communities for their rights. It provides a place for promoting democratic norms and has been a necessary element for a vibrant democracy, tolerant society and has been a fundamental ingredient of peace and prosperity. However; civil society face several threats and challenges in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and finds it difficult to prosper and play its real role. Unfortunately, Pakistan has been ruled by military for most of the time and even during democratic regime, democratic culture and norms have not grown and developed. Freedom of media is not often tolerated, while the formation of civil society organizations and unions are either banned or are being discouraged. The study also concludes that civil society cannot flourish in a society marked by fatalism, over religiosity and feudalism. The performance of CSOs also remain less satisfactory at local level while local governments are also reluctant to participate CSOs in a meaningful manner. Civil societies also face variety of challenges including lack of cooperation from government officials, LG members and face security issues, negative propaganda/perceptions, misplaced priorities, credibility, capacity and transparency issues which prevent them to play an effective role for sustainable local development and effective service delivery.

5.1. Recommendations

Based on study findings and conclusions the study suggests that the present nature of governance in Pakistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is traditional and archaic with little or no space for civil societies. Some of structural reforms are needed to provide space for CSOs and community participation. It would bring more efficiency and transparency in the system. Though initial devolution plan was framed with input from developmental organizations and provisions were incorporated for inclusion of CSO and community organizations. However, due to variety of reasons this was not materialized due to lack of adequate provisions for meaningful participation of CSOs, lack of support from public representatives, non-cooperative attitudes of government officials' particularly local government. Further, the process of NOCs and over regulations are very discouraging for growth and functioning of civil society and besides few genuine concerns, the undue restrictions should be reduced. Creation of favorable and conducive environment for CSO is very much essential for sustainable development and service delivery at local level.

The NGOs shall not only pursue western agenda and refrain from highlighting non issues and avoid negation and confrontation of local culture and they should know the local sensitivities and respect local culture and norms. The study also suggest that civil societies must extend their presence at local level and step forward for development and service delivery at local level and avoid sole concentration on urban areas. NGOs shall maintain a proper system of accountability and reduce corrupt practices for that certain stringent regulations should be adopted to bring more efficiency and transparency in the system.

Finally, local government system shall break the silence about the role of civil societies, and they should empower local organization and civil societies and they shall be made integral part of local governance system. This would create an atmosphere of mutual collaboration and would enable the public to have access to information and decision making process. The funds of local government should be spent through CSO and community organizations and civil works of general nature and minimum costs such as street pavements, drinking water supply schemes and smaller bridges and roads should be executed through CSOs and community organizations. This will improve not only strengthen community participation but will also improve the process and delivery of services in more efficient manner.

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