

Interview with

Marion Regina Müller

Head of the
Heinrich Böll Stiftung
Afghanistan Office

Joining our discussion today is Marion Regina Müller, Head of the HBS Afghanistan Office in Kabul. Ms Müller, on the 20th of October the second Kabul conference took place, at which the delegates to the Afghan Civil Society Forum were elected. You were there as an observer. What can you tell us about it?

Müller: The conference was very well attended. A great number of different female and male representatives from civil society, both from the Kabul area and the 34 provinces, had been invited to take part in the conference and to prepare these policy recommendations for the conference in Bonn. The discussions were very intensive, and a plethora of different interests and ideas were collected for the purpose of incorporating them into the policy recommendations.

At the end of the conference the election of the delegation took place, which comprises 34 members including 16 representatives from the provinces and 18 representatives from the Kabul/urban areas. This delegation will then travel to Bonn to the Civil Society Forum and present the policy recommendations that were approved at the conference. I would say that it was a highly successful and very exciting event.

The international community has now been involved in Afghanistan for 10 years. At this time, people like to take stock of what has been achieved. What would your judgement on this be if you had to describe the development of Afghan civil society over the last ten years?

Müller: Personally, I would say that it is very difficult in the case of Afghanistan to speak of civil society per se. Over the long years of armed conflict and the ensuing fragmentation of society along ethnic and regional lines, civil society has broken down – and it has not been able to reform again during the last 10 years either. I think that civil society is therefore often thought of as an organisational matter here, i.e. as civil society organisations. And in this context, one also has to say that many of these civil society actors were based in Pakistan or other neighbouring countries

during the years of war and did not return to Afghanistan until after the Taliban regime had fallen. These organisations focus on nearly all areas, especially the areas that are covered poorly or not at all by state organisations, from humanitarian aid and emergency aid to basic education and health to the area of human rights or the involvement of woman in decision-making processes.

You can see the following happening: During the past four years, numerous civic organisations have been founded with the aid of international funds. These have had a great deal of funding – in some cases an exaggerated amount of funding, which means that you see many organisations that have experienced fast and very uncoordinated growth. That has an effect on management, for instance, and actually also on the implementation of projects.

At the same time – and this is what many people from the partner organisations of Heinrich Böll Stiftung tell me – many civil society actors are having to cope with an increasingly deteriorating political situation and the security situation resulting from that. This means, for instance, that travelling to rural areas to carry out their work is very difficult and that many activities can now only be implemented with great difficulty. Especially civil society actors working in the area of human rights or the advancement of peace are practically all speaking about a sort of disillusionment and a bleak outlook with regard to their own work. You can also see that many positive developments, for instance in the area of women's rights, which were still going on until 2008, 2009, could not be brought to fruition.

In other words, I see many civil society actors, who are currently finding it difficult to express a positive vision with respect to their own future. And that is precisely where I see the potential for making good progress through the Afghanistan activities, i.e. the definition of policy recommendations to the Afghanistan conference in Bonn. Thanks to this process, there are once again many different representatives, male and female, of numerous different organisations assembled at the table, discussing the future of the country. They are having to come to agreements on specific recommendations at a political, economic and social level and to consider jointly what they as civil society actors can contribute. I think that this is a very positive process. It is also important to note that it is crucial that this process does not actually fizzle out after the Afghanistan conference in Bonn, but that it continues to be fostered and supported, that it is pursued further in a highly participatory manner with the involvement of many different actors and that it is not swamped once again by international funds from large international organisations.

You said that people are experiencing a bleak outlook and disillusionment and that you have great hope that the Civil Society Forum will have a positive effect with respect to the future participation of civil society in Afghanistan. Do you think that that could actually happen or is it more of a hope?

Müller: I think that it can really happen if you continue to support the process and this unity, which has emerged between these different actors at least at a fundamental level, in other words if the process won't just be terminated with a report

after the conference in Bonn. One thing that I would consider important, for instance, is that the policy recommendations that will be discussed in Bonn as well as the comments that will be collected on this topic will be taken back into the provinces once more, in a process following the Bonn conference – simply to keep this process alive, to involve even more actors in it and maybe also to cast a more critical light on the policy recommendations. I do think that this would provide an opportunity for supporting some sort of a basis in civil society.

Negative headlines about Afghanistan predominate in the German media landscape. What positive experiences have you actually had to date?

Müller: For me personally taking part in the preparatory process for Bonn has been very positive. It was lovely to see that many young people, many adolescents are involved, with different ideas, with very fresh ideas. That was a very nice experience. I am, of course, already in the country on behalf of Heinrich Böll Stiftung for the second time and can therefore make a comparison with my experience of three years ago.

I can see, for instance, that in Kabul at least you can observe many positive developments, for instance in the area of infrastructure. A great number of new streets have been built, which also partly has a positive effect on the flow of traffic. There is a new international airport. One major improvement is the supply of power: now the power is on 24 hours a day – as opposed to two to three hours every other day before.

I think that for a great number of people that represents huge progress. And you also see houses in the city that have been rebuilt, which has enlivened the street environment. There is now a great variety of local products available in the supermarkets compared to three years ago, when the offering consisted mainly of imported goods from neighbouring countries. And for me personally, it was a very positive experience to receive an extremely warm welcome from my colleagues here at Heinrich Böll Stiftung, but also from our partners.

One essential aspect of the process for the involvement of civil society is the criterion of “Afghan ownership”. What does this signify and to what extent is this criterion actually being met in connection with the Afghanistan activities?

Müller: “Afghan ownership” means that it is the representatives of civil society who are instrumental in and responsible for the planning, the implementation of the Afghanistan activities. This means that we as the involved international organisations, the political foundations, but also UNAMA and the German embassy take part in this process in an observing and advisory role, while the process itself is in the hands of the representatives of Afghan civil society. In concrete terms, a working and planning committee was established first of all. This consists of 12 umbrella organisations, of

NGOs, which are responsible for implementing the meeting. The committee organises planning meetings, for instance, collects the policy recommendations and develops them further. It has also organised and supported the election of the delegation that will travel to Bonn.

I think that they have managed to ensure the greatest possible inclusivity and also the involvement of as many actors from the provinces as possible, and great care is being taken to ensure that the policy recommendations, which are being developed, were actually devised based on the interests and needs of the representatives of Afghan civil society and not prescribed by some random international organisations. That is very important – and that has also been achieved very successfully to date.

Of course, HBS is collaborating with civil society organisations on some projects. Can you give us some descriptions in concrete terms?

Müller: Heinrich Böll Stiftung has been supporting civil society organisations in Afghanistan since 2003. This entails institutional support on the one hand, but also the provision of advice on how to develop organisations and the implementation of projects. There are two long-standing partners of HBS in particular involved here, namely The Liaison Office and the Women and Children Legal Research Foundation. Two organisations, which we have been supporting with advice from their inception to the present day.

In addition, Heinrich Böll Stiftung also cooperates with various civil society organisations at project level, for instance in the planning and implementation of research projects or conferences, the creation of publications as well as the production of audio-visual media, such as advertising spots on the topic of environmental pollution, or the production of folk songs on the subjects of democracy, integration and peace. With these activities, HBS tries to foster dialogue and the exchange of specialist expertise at national, regional and international level – in other words also bringing together civil society actors with state actors, with a regional and international focus.

Mrs Müller, thank you very much!