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SUCCESS STORY

Reaching Out through Religious Scholars

Creative and Counterpart work with religious scholars to promote civil society.



*Maulavi Amin in his mosque
Story by Halim Fidai and photo by Gohar Ali*

Each month Creative and Counterpart reach over 500 people, through roundtable discussions with religious scholars, raising awareness of civil society among the Afghan public.

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Maulavi Mahmadullah Amin, 33, has for the past five years served as a mullah at the Ghous-ul-Azam Dastageer Congregational Mosque in Kabul City, Afghanistan. In January 2007, Amin attended the first roundtable on “Ulema Perceptions of Civil Society and Their Role in its Development,” which convinced him of the need to inform his weekly audiences at his mosque of the importance of civil society.

“I was influenced by the importance, role and benefits of the civil society, particularly for Afghan society,” Amin said.

His 45-minute speech, highlighting the concept, values and role of civil society, was delivered to the almost 500 participants at his mosque. “In civil society, the spirit of cooperation amongst the citizens, volunteerism, and an understanding of rights, roles and responsibilities are the axes of building partnership for achieving a shared goal. [This] is the key for the development of Afghanistan.”

Contrary to the perception that Amin had prior to engaging in the roundtables, he learned that civil society has existed for centuries and is not part of a foreign-imposed agenda.

Creative Associates International, Inc. and Counterpart International are conducting monthly roundtable discussions such as the one that inspired Amin. During these sessions—attended by 26 ulema and one female scholar to date—ulema have talked about their perception of civil society, the challenges to its development in Afghanistan, and the role that ulema can play in this development.

Amin plans to continue disseminating the information he has learned through the roundtable discussions. “I am committed to deliver more sessions on civil society to my followers at least once a month to increase their awareness about their rights, and [the] responsibilities of citizens towards each other and their society,” he said.

Amin also uses his role as a teacher at the Secondary School of Qalai Zaman Khan in Kabul, to talk with teachers and students about civil society and to encourage them to participate in issues that affect their lives. “Each day teachers and students learn a new word about civil society,” Amin said.

While Amin has been successful in informing members of his mosque and students and teachers at his school, he recommends additional resources to further this process. Sitting near the desktop computer in his classroom, Amin suggested that “films, videos and CDs about civil society (in local languages),” would help him and other ulema gain a deeper understanding of these issues and, thus be better able to communicate them to Afghan society.

Following earlier recommendations from participants in 12 roundtables and 7 media fora, Creative and Counterpart began identifying and assembling a network of ulema who could promote civil society in Afghanistan. Being traditional agents of change at the community level, ulema can help eliminate skepticism and misperceptions held by the general public regarding civil society.

Counterpart International implements the Initiative to Promote Afghan Civil Society (IPACS) under a cooperative agreement from USAID; Creative Associates is one of Counterpart’s partners, responsible for the public outreach component.