

Afghanistan: Praise for New Civic Group in Helmand

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Organisation says it avoid politics and just wants to get things done.

A new advocacy group in Afghanistan's southern Helmand province has won praise from locals for its efforts to help them pursue legal claims, resolve disputes and access government services.

The Helmand Civil Society was set up about five months ago and already has more than 200 members, as well as serving as an umbrella organisation for 37 other groups representing students, teachers, doctors, tribal elders, the disabled and trade unions.

Since the fall of the Taleban in 2001, numerous non-government groups have been established across Afghanistan, but critics say they are not always focused on getting results.

Helmand residents say the new group, run entirely on a voluntary basis with no outside funding, has already made a difference.

Nizamoddin, a resident of Garmsir district, applied for help after his land was seized by "powerful men", and his appeals to government agencies proved fruitless.

"When I heard an office had been established in Helmand to help resolve such problems, I went there and asked for their assistance," he said. "The head of the office really helped me. He introduced me to the land dispute resolution office in Garmsir, and members of the society backed my efforts until I regained my land."

Nizamoddin said the individuals concerned were taken aback when they heard about the Helmand Civil Society's intervention, and just gave him his land back.

"This [group] really is an arbitration office; there's nothing like it anywhere in Helmand," he said.

The society has also managed to win over community leaders. Atiqullah Khan, a tribal elder in Helmand, said this was the first non-government group to make a real difference.

"More people go to them than to the governor's office or the provincial council, because they receive help without having to pay for it," he said. "Their success is due to the fact that their members come from all sections of society, and they heed the advice of tribal elders."

The group's spokesman, Hezbollah Khamosh, said that in the space of a few months, it had achieved a great deal, including lobbying Afghan president Hamed Karzai for permission to build a new building for Lashkar Gah university, currently in temporary premises.

The Helmand Civil Society's director, Sardar Mohammad Hamdard, said it was formed by young people frustrated with corruption officials, brutal strongmen, and an inactive provincial assembly.

"We try to bridge the gap between the people and the government, not just as a conduit for submitting complaints to officials but also as a way of getting government to deliver results to the people," he explained. "For the first time, young people are thinking about how they can work for the benefit of their own people in Helmand."

The society, which has received a permit to function from the justice ministry, has won praise from the office of Helmand's governor Mohammad Naim.

The governor's spokesman Omar Zwak said his office was working closely with the society,

"They've achieved good results so far," he said. "We're in touch with them on a daily basis to discuss various matters. They are a great source of information about the problems people face. They share these problems with officials and seek solutions to them."

In a province where the Taleban are very much in evidence, Zwak said the Helmand Civil Society enjoyed one distinct advantage – independence.

"They aren't government people whose activities the armed opposition would obstruct," he explained.

The Helmand Civil Society's work on education has caused some controversy.

Spokesman Khamosh noted that the group's efforts ensured that their preferred candidate was appointed

as education chief for the Nawa district, and the official swiftly reopened four schools that had been closed. After hearing concerns raised by the group, Afghan education minister Faruq Wardak promised to address the issues.

This activism has upset some officials, who have accused the Helmand Civil Society of interfering in the affairs of government and trying to manoeuvre its own people into political posts.

Mohammad Nasim Safi, the province's director of education, said the society was acting beyond its authority and had made baseless allegations of shortcomings in his department.

"I'm not claiming there are no problems in the education department or with the system itself, but that's something that everyone needs to work towards solving. What good do their criticisms do?" he asked.

Khamosh insisted the society's members had no political affiliations or ambitions.

"We don't have any enemies, but we aren't scared of anyone, either," he said. "Officials are making problems for us because they don't understand the aims of the [Helmand] Civil Society. We're trying to convince them."

Popular support for the group seems to be growing.

Niaz Mohammad represents 70 families who were previously displaced by the violence in Helmand. On returning from Kabul to Lashkar Gah, the families were given two days' worth of food to keep them going.

"No one helped us apart from God and this society. One of our children had died of hunger, and our other children were close to starving," he said. "Members of the society paid for bread and other foodstuffs and promised to collect more aid for us from other charity organisations and the people. They're still helping us, going from one office to the next on our behalf. May God bless them."

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