

Conference on “Democracy, Traditions and Gender”

Islamabad, 22 – 24 February 2007
Organized by the Heinrich Böll Foundation

Final Paper

By Conrad Schetter

Center for Development Research(ZEF), University of Bonn

This paper aims to present some findings about the conference “Democracy, Traditions and Gender“, which was hosted by the Heinrich Böll Foundation (HBF) in Islamabad, 22 – 24 February 2007. In this paper I like to present some impressions and recommendations in regard to the following topics:

- Assessment of the Conference
- Discourse on Local Governance
- Recommendations for the future work of HBF

I have to underline that these impressions and recommendations are the result of randomly observations during the conference and are not based on a systematic evaluation.

1) Assessment of the Conference

The conference reached its goal to bring together representatives of the civil society from several countries of South Asia and West Asia to discuss core themes such as democracy, gender and traditions. However the audience was too large to develop common understandings or to discuss one of these topics in detail. In the following I like to shed light on the participants, on the design of the conference as well as on the content.

a) Participants: I appreciated the approach of HBF to invite representatives of the civil society from several countries of West Asia and South Asia. Hereby people from different states and different cultural backgrounds had the chance to share ideas about political development. However, in my opinion, many participants only attended one or two sections of the conference. While there were about 40-50 participants who continuously participated throughout the whole conference, most of the other participants did not attended from the beginning to the end. This was a clear shortcoming of the conference. A joint process, including all participants, was not possible. Perhaps one of the next HBF conferences should aim to facilitate a process in which all participants continuously work on the same topic and are part of a joint development of thoughts.

b) Arena: The design of the conferences stimulated discussions among the participants. Especially the Open Space Forum offered a chance for all participants to bring forward their own ideas and problems. Especially the round of announcing the topics of the Open Space Forum was a highlight of the conference. However I had the impression that the interest and enthusiasm of the participants in the first round of the Open Space Forum (before lunch break) was higher than in the second one (after lunch break). Moreover the

merging of several groups did not necessarily let to a synergy. Much more I had the impression that in groups, in which different themes were brought together, many participants could not discuss their topic in detail; for example the merging of “education in the FATA”, “tribes in Punjab”, and “Democracy”. After the Open Space Forum I missed a joint discussion (not in the form of group speakers) to bring the different strands again together.

c) Contents: The three topics Democracy, Traditions and Gender are strongly interrelated. Thus the conference offered to discuss always two of these topics through the lens of the third one. This was a successful approach. Nevertheless, I had the impression that the discussions on the core topics often only scratched the surface. Most of the participants did not develop new thoughts. One example is the discussion revolving around democracy. Here democracy was often understood as a label for modernity. I missed that the discussion went further to dispute for example the balance of individual and collective rights in democratic societies. Thus the idea that collective rights (e.g. women rights, minority rights) are constraining individual rights in democracies could have let to a stimulating discussion.

2) Discourse on Local Governance

The session on Local Governance focussed on the role it is playing in Afghanistan. The discussion particular revolved around the National Solidarity Program (NSP). While Bijay Karmacharya of UN HABITAT developed a bright picture, how the NSP is accepted by the people and how it is changing the power structures of communities, I doubted in my presentation the role of NSP as an intervention to build new institutions on local level. Taking the academic debate on institutional change into consideration I endeavoured to show that NSP is an intervention which will only be accepted as long as money will flow into the projects. If this money flow will stop, the NSP and its new built structures will collapse. Moreover I tried to show that the NSP is often enough un-intended strengthening the given power structures or is at least undermined by the existing power structures. Another main concern is that NSP neglects the institutions which were found in place and characterizes them as illegitimate ones. Hereby NSP shows that its main goal is not to empower the local people but to implement modern institutions. This is why NSP has to be understood as one brick in the whole confrontation between an intervention of modernity and the defence of local identities in Afghanistan, what also includes the so-called war on terrorism, the state-building approach etc. I hoped that my presentation contributed to the discussion about the discovery of the “local” by development agencies and what does this mean for the change of local societies. Thus the NSP is one example for a larger recent approach of development politics which has huge impacts across the globe. Interestingly enough the shortcomings of the good local governance approach are everywhere (e.g. East Timor; Tajikistan) more or less the same. Thus, the simple lesson, which should be learned is, that development agencies should work with the institutions, which already exist, and should avoid replacing them one by one with new institutions.

3) Recommendations for the future work of HBF

The aim of this conference was to identify themes for the future work of HBF. Hereby I like to give some recommendations. I think HBF should continue its overall strategy to assist the civil society in various countries. Hereby HBF can develop a clear agenda which differs from the one of other German political foundations. However the term “civil society” is still blurred and its meaning is changing from place to place. Moreover the composition of state, civil society is varying a lot in Western Asia and South Asia and the role of (Islamic) traditions and its impact on the society differs. The following graph will

only provide a very rough overview about the current situation in selected countries/regions

Graph 1: Overview about State, Civil Society and Role of Islamic Traditions in Selected Asian Countries

	State	Tendency	Civil Society	Tendency	Role of Islamic Traditions	Tendency
Afghanistan	Very weak	Slowly increasing	Very weak	Stable	Very strong	Stable
Uzbekistan	Very strong	Stable	Medium	Slowly increasing	Weak	Increasing
Iran	Strong	Stable	Strong	Increasing	Strong	Slowly decreasing
Pakistan	Weak	Stable	Medium	Slowly decreasing	Strong	Increasing
Turkey	Medium	Slowly decreasing	Strong	Slowly increasing	Medium	Slowly increasing

Against this background the support of civil society is facing different challenges in each country and accordingly to this the approach of HBF should differ from country to country. While for example in Iran strong civil society organizations exist which offer many entry points for modern ideas and serve as multipliers, in Afghanistan civil society organizations have a very limited impact on the society.

a) Regional Focus: To date the focus of the HBF offices in Islamabad and Kabul lie for good reason on Pakistan and Afghanistan. Even if it is impossible to enlarge the project work to the whole region, I recommend to HBF to strengthen its contacts into Central Asia and Iran. Both regions are keys for the political and economic development of the next decades. Moreover in both regions a transformation of the society is to be observed. Due to the limited funds of the HBF I suggest that the foundation should focus on entering into the Civil Society networks of both regions and particularly focus on gender issues. In Central Asia more and more a gender inequality is to be observed, due to women are losing influences on decision-making processes. In Iran a strong women movement exists, which should be taken into consideration.

b) Thematic Focus: Due to my limited knowledge on HBF activities in Pakistan I will concentrate on Afghanistan. Here I recommend that HBF should follow the already chosen path. Modern civil society organizations in Afghanistan own very limited capacities and are not able to reach large parts of the society. The Tribal Liaison Office (TLO) offers an alternative, to bring development agencies and civil society organizations into contact with tribal elders. Many of the shortcomings of the international intervention during the last five years happened because the traditional culture of Afghanistan was not taken into consideration or even neglected. However due to the goal setting of HBF, the foundation should also continue its work with modern civil society organizations. In Afghanistan it seems like that projects to empower women lost its credibility among large parts of the society during the last years and nowadays men in general react hostile towards gender related projects. Thus I suggest to focus on gender related issues in a rather indirect way. Lastly I am thankful that HBF takes Local Governance as a theme into consideration. I feel that Local Governance projects such as NSP are of high relevance due to they are aiming a social/political engineering on the local level. While the idea, to empower the local people, is strong, local governance projects often enough neglect the given institutions in a local setting. Unbalanced and ill-implemented projects can create conflicts and lead to unintended results. To sum it up, local governance projects, which are today high on the agenda of international organizations, are situated in the interface between tradition and modernity and will face many challenges in future.