

Participation of Undergraduate Youths in the Decision making Process and Local Governance, Kandahar Province, Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

This research is conducted in Kandahar province situated in the southern part of Afghanistan. Kandahar province, due to its strategic location plays a vital role in the economy and politics of Afghanistan. Considering its role in the politics and economy of the country makes this study more essential for policy-makers and further researches. The focus of this research has been on the participation of the undergraduate youths in the decision-making process at local governance level. The scope of the research is limited to Kandahar Province only. The research is a descriptive research in nature and uses both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The primary data is collected by using questionnaire and unstructured personal interviews and the secondary data involves desk research comprising books, articles, reports and newsletters. The findings of this study show that perception of the majority of undergraduate youths regarding their future role in the decision-making process at local governance in Kandahar province is positive though their current role in the decision-making process at local governance level is vague and weak. It is believed that the current government led by President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani has paid some attention to the inclusion of youths in the government which is a sign of hope for the youths. The creation of youths' parliament and National Youth Policy are some of the achievements of the current government in promoting youths' participation. The youths believed that the current rapid development of the world has a significant impact on the behavior of the governments in the developing countries. Illiterate warlords and tribal leaders will ultimately lose their power and will be overtaken by the youths in the years to come.

1. Introduction

The evolutions in societies over a period of times bring numerous challenges to the governments and rulers all over the world. These challenges demand the governments and rulers to respond as quickly as possible to the needs and demands of the societies. If governments and rulers fail to do so, the aftermaths can be hostile and out of control which may sometimes even end up with their collapse. As is evident, early 21st century experienced drastic changes caused by youths in the Arab countries (Lührmann, 2013), called the Arab Spring, where these youths were marginalized and discriminated for years. In order to succeed and sustain, traditional and developing societies need to focus on the inclusion of the citizens as a whole and youths in particular in the policy-formulation and planning process at both national and local levels.

According to Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives". Public administration in any country will not succeed without proper citizens' participation mechanism in the administrative process and thus making citizens' participation in the decision-making as a mandatory principle for a democratic form of government.

In the recent decades the changing nature and drastically growing scope of government functions have increased, even more than before, the need for citizens' direct participation.

The governments around the world especially in the developing and war-torn countries have experienced a number of challenges and failures in most of their developmental projects mainly because of lack of proper citizens' participation and cooperation (Palekar, 2012).

In order to achieve developmental goals governments initiated inclusion of citizens in the various stages of the administrative processes. Their participation is ensured through decision-making, implementation, evaluation, and profit-sharing. It has been evident that the more the citizens are involved the more there are chances of success both in terms of implementation and quality of the programs and projects. Previous studies show that citizens' participation increases a sense of belongingness and thus their cooperation in the developmental program.

Afghanistan being a traditional and developing society is considered to be one of the youngest countries in the world with having 47% under the age of 15 and 16% under the age of 5 (Samuel Hall Consulting, 2013). Afghan government will need to manage, direct and optimally utilize this fastest growing force. But if it fails to direct and utilize them properly, they can become a potential threat to the development of the country in the years to come. Exclusion of this group from the decision-making will have a twofold negative effect; one, waste of a vital resource (the youths), and second, giving an opportunity to the radical and terrorist groups to easily recruit

them which will ultimately destabilize not only Afghanistan but the entire region.

Kandahar province situated in the southern Afghanistan due to its strategic location plays a vital role in the economy and politics of Afghanistan (BBC, 2018). Considering its role in the politics and economy of the country makes this study more essential for policy-makers and further researches. There are a number of studies available on citizens' participation in Afghanistan and Kandahar province. However, study on undergraduate youths in Kandahar province has never been conducted.

The focus of this research has been on the participation of the undergraduate youths in the decision-making process at local governance level.

2. Objectives of the research

The research is conducted in Kandahar Province (17 districts and the main city of Kandahar). The main objectives of this research are:

1. To find out active participation of undergraduate youths in the decision-making process and local governance in Kandahar province.
2. To explore views and perspectives of undergraduate youths on their participation in the decision making and local governance in Kandahar province.
3. To discover major barriers of undergraduate youths' participation in the decision making and local governance in Kandahar province.
4. To find out possible ways of improving and enhancing undergraduate youths' participation in the decision-making process and local governance in Kandahar Province.

3. Research Methodology

This research is a mixed research (qualitative & quantitative) in nature which relies on both the primary and secondary data. The secondary data involves desk research comprising books, articles, reports and newsletters. And the primary data is collected by using questionnaire and unstructured personal interviews.

The study consists of a stratified random sampling which is conducted and analyzed in between June and November 2018. For the purpose of the primary data collection, the province is divided into 17 districts and the main city (Kandahar City). Two to three undergraduate youths depending on the availability of them, aged 20 to 35 years old were randomly selected in each district of the study area including the main city of Kandahar, making the total number of the respondents 50. The data collected is analyzed using graphs and charts along with qualitative analysis.

4. Findings and discussion

The findings of this research show that 72% of the undergraduate youths participated in some kind of meeting held by public departments in Kandahar province in Afghanistan which supported the first assumption (It is believed that some of the undergraduate youths take part in the

decision-making process and local governance in Kandahar province) of this research and only 28% of them have not participated in such meetings.

Furthermore, 90% of the undergraduate youths expressed their willingness to participate in future meetings of public departments in this province which is a good sign for the government and only 10% of them said that they will not take part in such future meetings. Though undergraduate youths are taking part in meetings organized by the government, their representation through associations is as low as 22% which indicates that it will have a very low impact on the decision-making process. In addition, 78% of the undergraduate youths did not have membership of any type of association which implies that there are very few pressure groups. Low level of membership of the undergraduate youths in associations will reduce their impact on the decision-making process in the local governance of this region.

The second assumption of our research (It is believed that some of the undergraduate youths take part in the decision-making process and local governance in Kandahar province) is not fully supported by the findings because 42% of the undergraduate youths believed that politicians and some of the elite families set the agenda and formulate policies and plans for this area. In addition, 28% of them believed that it is done by tribal leaders and 22% believed that it is done by educated youths while 8% believed that it is done by the citizens.

The research further discovered that although undergraduate youths' participation in the decision-making is low, 56% of the undergraduate youths believed that they will have a very high impact on policies and plans if given the chance to participate in the decision-making process and local governance. Yet 32% of them believed that their impact will be moderate while 12% believed that their impact on policies and plans will remain as low as it is today. So the third assumption (Some of the undergraduate youths think that their participation in the decision making doesn't matter and will not make any impact on the policies and plans of the local governance in Kandahar province) of our research is not supported as 56% undergraduate youths believed that they will have a very high impact on the policies and plans if given the chance to participate in the decision-making process.

The barriers towards undergraduate youths' participation include their perception about their current weak role in the decision-making process. The fourth assumption (Security, adverse economic condition, some bureaucrats and some elite families are considered to be the biggest barriers towards their participation in the decision making and local governance in Kandahar province) of our research is not supported by the findings of this research as 26% of the participants believed that their participation in the decision-making process will not make any difference because the government does what it likes to do. This indicates that the negative perception of these youths about the current local government is one of the biggest barriers.

The second major barrier is lack of communication as 20% of the participants said that they are not informed properly

about the policy formulation process and plans. The third barrier that received the highest weightage (16%) from the participants is that they believed that the decision-makers serve some of the elite families and their own interests only. At number four, 14% of the participants believed that the decision makers do not consider them in the policy formulation and plans. At the fifth place comes security for which 12% of the participants indicated that the area where they lived was very insecure that was why they couldn't participate in the decision-making process. Finally, the sixth and last barrier receiving 12% weightage is about the economic problems of these youths that prevented them from taking part in the decision-making process.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this research shows that majority (72%) of the undergraduate youths have participated in some kind of meeting held by the public departments in Kandahar province. Though these meetings might not have necessarily been held for the purpose of decision-making, participation of these youths in such public meetings is very important. Their willingness to participate in such meetings in the future was also as high as 90%. Furthermore, the perception about the impact they will have in policy formulation was 56% and perception about the importance of the input that they will provide for the policies and plans if given the chance in the process was also high (82%).

Since the willingness to participate among these youths is very high, the government only needs to provide a platform and utilize this most vital resource for the development of the country optimally. In addition, there is a high level of self-confidence among these youths as they believed that they can have a very high impact on the policies and plans if given the chance to make them. This indicates that these youths have profound knowledge, interests and concerns in the issues of their society. So it is now government's responsibility to utilize this stratum of the society in the decision and policy making process. It is the responsibility of the government to provide a platform where they can assemble on a regular basis for debates and discussions over various important social, economic and political issues.

Besides, various capacity building trainings are to be provided to these youths which will enhance their decision-making capacity and other vital skills such as leadership and communication. The central and local governments need to develop a proper communication system through which line departments at provincial and district levels, NGOs (that are involved with youths) and youths themselves can communicate and cooperate with each other. Government should also

maintain security so that youths can participate in the decision-making process without any concern for their life.

Contrary to that, the perception of undergraduate youths towards current policy making process and their inclusion in the decision-making process was very negative because 42% of them believed that politicians and some of the elite families set the agenda and formulate policies and plans for Kandahar province while 28% believed that it is done by tribal leaders and 22% believed that it is done by the educated youths and 8% of them believed that it is done by the citizens. These youths distrusted local government and saw the future of them as completely blurred, weak and more or less similar to the current scenario. According to them the decisions are only made by the higher authorities and they never consider the opinions of them. As of now their role in the decision-making process is very weak and decisions are made only by the top level administrators. To them the future of the undergraduate youths can only be brighter when the government provides support in the real sense and if not, getting education in Kandahar province itself would be a waste of time. If the situation remains the same then it is difficult for them to become part of the decision-making process and local governance. Transparency is one of the keys to reduce this type of negative perception in the society towards government. Hence, the local government in Kandahar province should bring transparency so that it can reduce the gap between educated youths and the government.

Majority (78%) of these youths have no membership in any kind of association. Low membership of these youths in associations implies existence of few and weak pressure groups in the province. In the absence of strong associations the government will not feel any pressure and moreover weak pressure groups will not have the capacity to influence the decisions of the government.

Over all the perception of the majority of undergraduate youths regarding their future role in the decision-making process at local governance in Kandahar province in Afghanistan is positive though their current role in the decision-making process at local governance level is vague and weak. According to them the current government led by Mohammad Ashraf Ghani has paid some attention to the inclusion of youths in the government which is a sign of hope for them. The creation of youths' parliament and National Youth Policy are some of the achievements of the current government in promoting youths' participation. These youths believed that the current rapid development of the world has a significant impact on the behavior of the governments in the developing countries. Illiterate warlords and tribal leaders will ultimately lose their power and will be overtaken by the youths in the years to come.

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