



**Shrinking Environment for  
Civil Society Organizations  
in  
A F G H A N I S T A N**

A security and Financial  
Assessment

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S h r i n k i n g  
e n v i r o n m e n t f o r c i v i l  
s o c i e t y o r g a n i z a t i o n s  
i n

**Afghanistan**

A  
Security and Financial Assessment

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**Abstract:**

The enabling environment for Afghan civil society in terms of security and financial sustainability has become more deteriorated after the US-Taliban deal-Doha in 2019, following U.S and its allies' troops drawdown from Afghanistan. Recently, the fighting intensified all over the country and Taliban gaining more territorial control, CSOs activities have been hindered both in terms of financial and security. Today, CSOs are deprived of funding and are currently facing a decrease in funding opportunities. At the same time, constraints are more visible to CSOs operating in a secure environment. This research aimed to explore the enabling and disabling conditions under which CSO operate in Afghanistan with focus on their security environment and financial viability.

The findings of this research are based on interviews and surveys conducted in May-July 2021 with 15 CSOs representatives on financial and security environment.

*\* Please note, this research was conducted shortly before the 2021 political change within the country.*

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# Executive Summary

**The US and international forces' drawdown must not undermine the need for a vibrant, strong and free civil society in Afghanistan to ensure the achievement of twenty years of efforts.**

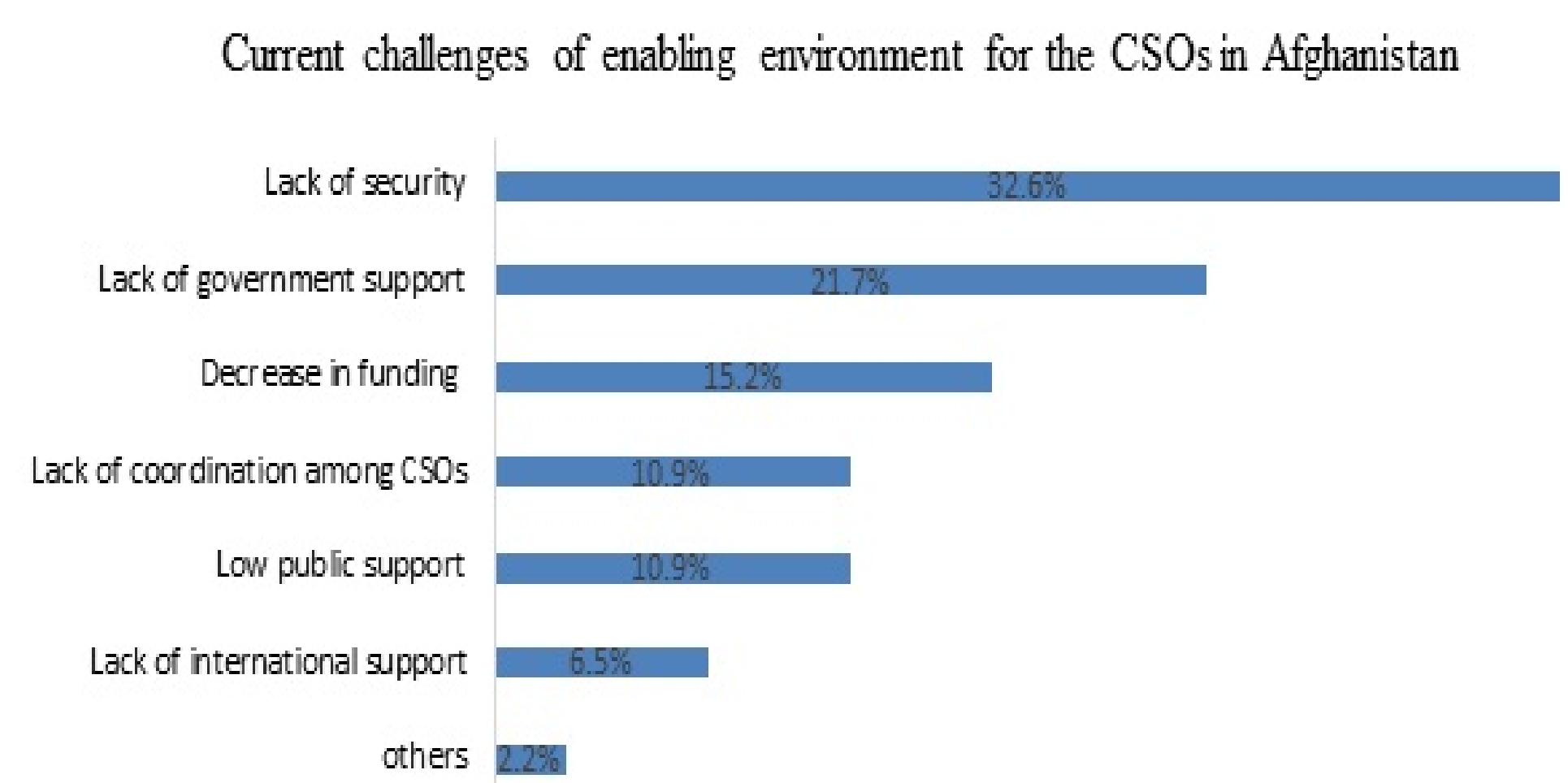
Afghan Civil Society Organizations have been a crucial agent of economic development, political stability, and promoting culture of diversity. Since 2001, inflow of foreign aid has increased the number of CSOs in Afghanistan. During two decades the Afghan CSOs have been at the forefront of development and pursuit of basic liberal values. But, the last two years, CSOs have persistent difficulties that narrowed down the civic space significantly[1].

The US decision of full forces withdrawal will leave the fate of Afghan civil society uncertain with the unprecedented level of increase in violence. CSOs operation has become more difficult, as the result of the increase in direct threats against them and indirect ones reducing CSOs' ability to operate at their best while they are facing increasing and unacceptable levels of both security and financial constraints. These constraints affected CSOs diverse activities by expediting the shrinkage of enabling environment for CSOs.

Insecurity pointed as the highest concerns for the CSOs followed by lack of government support and financial sustainability. However, these trends portray the emerging down-scaling in the enabling environment for the CSOs that might fade away the two decades of tireless and costly efforts.

[1][https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama\\_special\\_report\\_killing\\_of\\_human\\_rights\\_defenders\\_and\\_journalists\\_in\\_afghanistan\\_2018-2021\\_february\\_2021.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_special_report_killing_of_human_rights_defenders_and_journalists_in_afghanistan_2018-2021_february_2021.pdf).

The result of this research shows that CSOs are operating in a climate of fear and uncertainty, where CSOs are subjected to insecure environment. The Government has failed to meet their commitments to provide safety and secure conditions to CSOs and, the international community to support civil society with findings.



# Introduction

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Civil Society in Afghanistan played a vital part in creating free and open space for exercising fundamental rights to association, participation, communication, and free expression of views. CSOs and NGOs provided platform for a free dialogue between diverse actors, private and state as well as public ones. Considering CSOs as a crucial site for the development and pursuit of basic human and civil rights such as individual freedom, social pluralism, and democratic citizenship, the development of the last two decades in Afghanistan is undoubtedly a part of the contribution the Afghan Civil Society carried. Despite the protracted war in the country CSOs have been striving in providing and creating pluralistic society and free and open space for exercising fundamental rights. While CSOs become indisputable part of political, cultural and economic life of the war-torn country.

The United States agreement with the Taliban on the withdrawal of troops will ensue difficulties in establishing a peace process, hence making the future of Afghanistan's civil society and the values that they represent under the risk of uncertain. It has become highly dangerous for any individual or CSO to publicly operate, when according to CIVICUS monitor 2017 the freedom of expression in the country is particularly endangered. It goes on to report that 2016 was the most dangerous year so far for journalists and media professionals in Afghanistan, with 13 journalists and media professionals killed and 88 recorded cases of violent assault and intimidation of journalists[2]. 2017 has also encountered a series of targeted killings and beatings of journalists across the country[3]. Female journalists (and civil society activists) in particular are exposed to legal and physical prosecution by both state and non-state actors.

[2] U.S. Agency for International Development. Pdf.usaid.gov. (2021). Retrieved 17 October 2021, from [https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf\\_docs/PA00WGP9.pdf](https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00WGP9.pdf)

[3] *ibid*

According to the Afghanistan Institute for Civil Society's (AICS) report on enabling environment 2017 shows that the state of the enabling environment for CSOs deteriorated since 2016[4], the 2018 report shows that this trend goes on[5]. Meanwhile, with the start of intra-Afghan peace talk in 2020, the Afghan civil society situation has worsened in both terms of security and financing. According to the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) report 2021[6] Afghanistan has witnessed a sharp number in the killing of human rights defenders and media professionals since the commencement of peace talks.

On the other hand, CSOs have been facing serious financial challenges that threaten their operations and activities at a time when their services and their mobilization are most needed. The other challenges have also appeared after the US and the Taliban agreement in 2020[7]. In one instance, it raised concerns among Afghan civil society and the signs of a shrinking enabling environment are more prominent than ever. The insecurity which confines continuous work of CSOs and the lack of sufficient funds are two significant contributing factors to the shrinking of civil society space. As expressed by the CSOs operating in dire condition in Afghanistan, in the interviews with their representatives, the insecure operating environment is the main challenges followed by lack of government support and financial support among others.

[4] Acbar.org.(2021). Retrieved 17 October 2021, from <http://www.acbar.org/upload/1509511098944.pdf>.

[5] AICS "The State of Enabling Environment for Civil society in Afghanistan" <https://akflearninghub.org/documents/the-state-of-enabling-environment-for-civil-society-in-afghanistan/>

[6] UNAMA, 2021, <https://unama.unmissions.org/killi ng-human-rights-defenders-and-media-professionals-afghanistan-%E2%80%93-new-un-report>

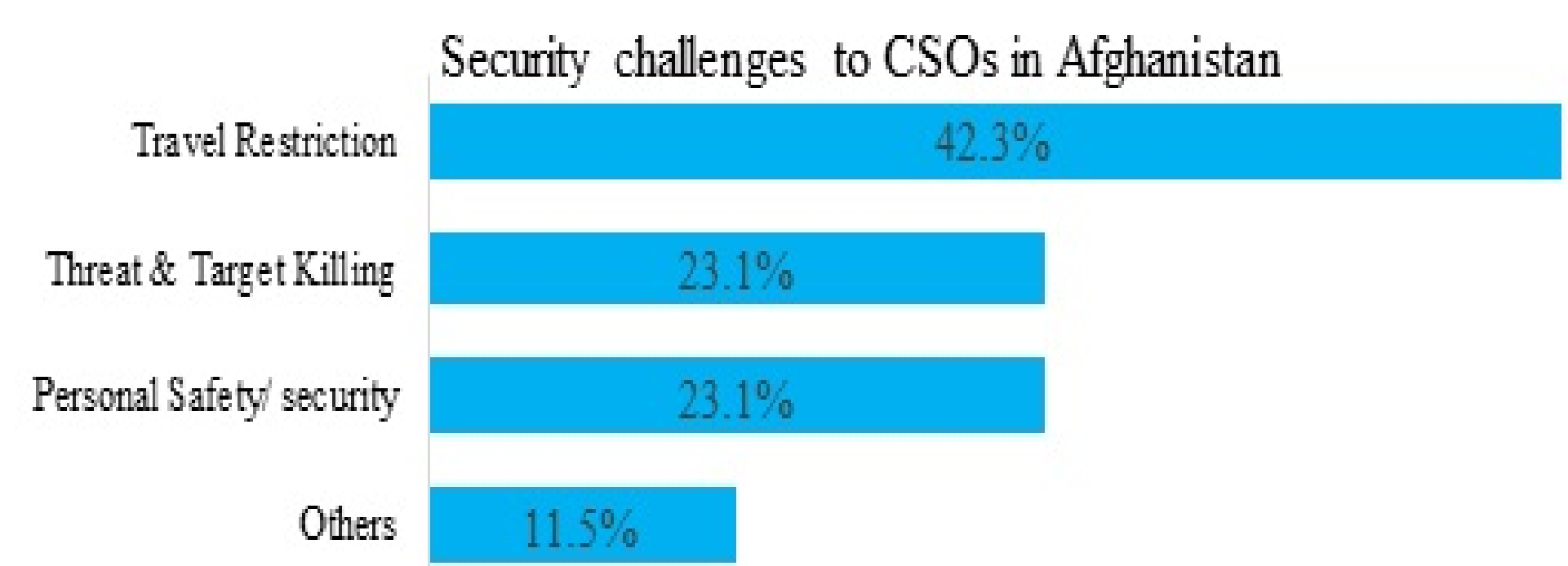
[7] <https://l4p.odi.org/assets/images/ODI-L4P-NGOs-and-civil-society-Bowden-Siddiqi-2020.pdf>

# Security Environment

A climate of fear shade and read changes on the work of CSOs in Afghanistan, made it difficult to operate. The everyday insecurity environment available for civil society, activists and citizens have been under extreme attack over the past few months in Afghanistan according to multiple sources and in this line with the results informing this report. Data obtained through the in-depth interviews illustrate the major security challenges hampers CSOs operation in Afghanistan. CSOs are intimidated, assaulted and sometimes up to death, as security remains a big concern and is more fragile than ever, as the latest reports show the highest records of civilian casualties, and of particular concern is the targeted killing of prominent Afghans social activists in 2020/21. Furthermore, majority of the survey respondents 42.3% stated that there are travel restrictions, while, travel restrictions also mentioned in interviews with CSOs leaders. CSOs have experienced travel restrictions due to the deterioration of CSOs secure and safe operating environment. Meanwhile, at this moment in areas that there are endeavors of control by the government and the Taliban. The local leadership of both warring parties are not interested in promoting or sustaining civil society. Currently, the Afghan civil society is on the frontline, and suffers greatly from the closing space due to growing violence and the targeted assassination in the country. Therefore, in most cases, CSOs have been induced to disband, abandon, restrict their operation, relocate or change operational activities. As a result of insecurity, apparently CSOs either downsized their activities or forced to close down their provincial offices, stayed limited or fully downsized.

It means that civil society organizations not only suffer growing violence directly but also are intimidated indirectly through mental burden, psychological disorder and institutional chaos induced by insecurity, which frequently leads to self-censorships, self-restriction and redeployment of civic activity away from advocacy for rights and toward fair and inclusive service provisions[8]. This deteriorated civic space contributes to wider movements of democratic recession, through reduced scrutiny and reporting on policies and on human rights abuses as well as on attempts to subvert independent institutions. Because, CSO is a crucial agent of democracy for making open space for all citizens to participate in public affairs, yet to be widely promoted for exercising their fundamental rights.

The result of the survey shows that threats from the non-state actors are very high, which creates travel restrictions followed by target killing of civil activists and personal security



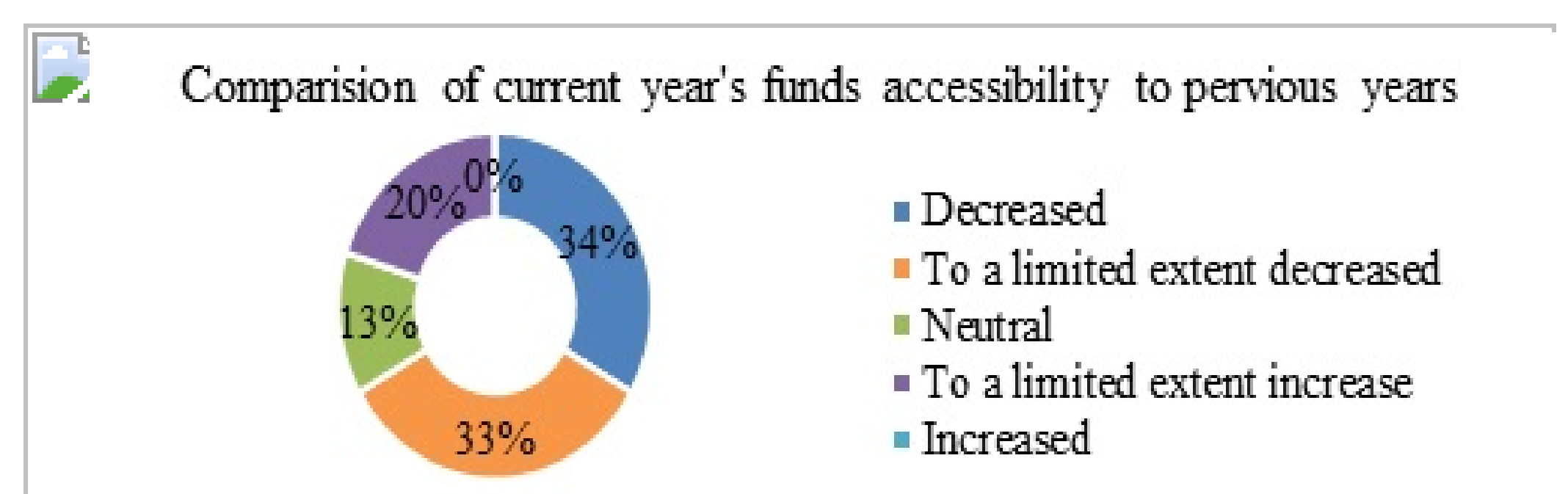
[8] Bossuyt, J., & Ronceray, M. (2020). Ecdpm.org. Retrieved 17 October 2021, from <https://ecdpm.org/wp-content/uploads/Claiming-Back-Civic-Space-Towards-Approaches-Fit-2020s-Report-May-2020-ECDPM.pdf>.

# Financial Environment

Disruption of funding is another contributory factor to diminishing civil society space[9]. The drawdown and eventually the withdrawal of U.S forces and reduction in foreign funding to CSOs will make the future of CSOs uncertain. The financial sustainability of CSOs correlates to the degree of political stability in the country. The present Afghan CSOs development cognates with US-led intervention in 2001, accompanied by the tremendous influx amount foreign aid. The troops' withdrawal by the United States has escalated tensions among Afghan CSOs with political uncertainty and the fragility of the security situation in the country. As a consequence, such a situation adversely affects international and humanitarian organizations to experience pressure on the funding they award to the local CSOs organizations and lack of respect for international humanitarian law on the ground, limited opportunities for protection and restricted freedom of movements. As such, the future of Afghanistan's civil society and free civic space, as key elements of democracy, is seemingly more uncertain and vulnerable than ever. Thus, it has become highly unlikely to secure funding in a situation where no presence of international forces uphold the enabling environment. There are prospects that the CSOs will come vulnerable to financial unsustainability. It is necessary to acknowledge that the Afghan CSOs/NGOs are often dependent on international networks, foreign funding opportunities and expertise.

[9] Howard, K., Bresnihan, S., Mavhinga, D., Chirwa, W., Mayaya, B., & Winstanley, L. (2014). Cordaid.org. Retrieved 17 October 2021, from <https://www.cordaid.org/en/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2014/06/SpaceForCivilSociety.pdf>.

The CSOs financial accessibility to funding has strongly decreased as compared to previous years, that shows 34% of respondents stated decrease in funding. On the hand 33% respondents stated decrease in funding to limited extend. On the contrary, 20% of the respondent CSOs confirmed increase in their accessibility to funding. While, the survey shows no increase in funding.





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## Conclusion

In the light of current fragile situation in Afghanistan, blurriness prevails on the enabling environment of CSOs. The current fragility of freely operating civic space goes beyond human rights, and will inadvertently put a negative impact on educational quality, access to proper health services, inclusive economic development and citizens as whole. And the adversely affect will be extended to anti-poverty activities, peace and conflict resolutions work. Restrictions on the CSOs environment will broadly undermine the ability of citizens to exercise the civil rights. According to the findings of this report most young and local NGOs faces uncertain future in the country ahead of the full US withdrawal. As such, it apparently moves toward shutting down the civic space including the targeted assassination of human rights defenders, intimidation of activists, self-censorship, restrictions and decrease on foreign findings to curtail the critical work of independent civil society organizations in Afghanistan. Funding reduction and increase in insecurity have imposed restriction on civil society enabling environment and operations after the US-Taliban Doha deal in 2019.

## Recommendations

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**First:**

International organizations must financially support Afghan CSOs and establish the core fund mechanism for CSOs operating in conflicted and fragile Afghanistan.

**Second:**

CSOs should take a responsive position to their insecurity issues both with state and non-state actors.

**Third:**

CSOs must strengthen their coordination at all levels with non-state actors to ensure protection and security.

**Fourth:**

CSOs, International community, State and non-state actors must act to ensure that the role of CSOs as a vital development and peace actor should be protected

**Fifth:**

CSOs, Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) and media must do risk analysis and support strategies to mitigate the risks to their organizations.

