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**Supporting Social Justice in Afghanistan through Public Access to Official Documentation: The ACKU Legal Collection Project**

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Social justice in Afghanistan is a nascent concept struggling to gain a solid basis in everyday life. Women and minority groups fight for recognition and respect; corruption, cronyism, and nepotism are rampant; and confidence in government is decreasing (Akseer, Warren and Rieger, 2017). Civil and human rights are not taught in Afghan schools, and the average Afghan prefers to use local *shuras* (discussion and dispute resolution mechanisms) than state courts (Akseer, Warren and Reiger, 2017). Although Afghans are embracing the ideals of a free and democratic society, as evidenced by participation in democratic elections and peaceful protest demonstrations, the implementation of social justice in Afghans’ everyday lives remains challenging.

A major barrier to improving Afghans’ participation in social justice is a lack of access to information about justice and civil rights in Afghanistan. Several projects over the last 15 years have attempted to address the need to develop rule of law in Afghanistan, including raising awareness among Afghan people of their rights under the law. The International Development Law Organization (2015), the United States Institute of Peace (n.d.), and the Afghanistan Justice Sector Support Program (2018) are just a few of the many organizations working hard to spread information about human rights and social justice. However, these attempts tend to focus on specific areas of concern, such as women’s or children’s rights, or rights regarding labor or due process. Accessibility of all official legal documentation to the general public has not been given thorough attention.

The *Official Gazette*, the official publication of laws and governmental decrees (similar to the United States’ *Federal Register*) is not widely distributed in print, and while it is available online at the Ministry of Justice’s website (, it is difficult to access and use. The chronology of the gazettes is incomplete, and the gazettes that are present are simply scanned copies uploaded as PDFs. There remains a lack of accessible official legal documentation.

The Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University (ACKU) is now addressing this gap in information accessibility through a new project called “ACKU Legal Collection” (Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University, n.d.) The goal of the project is to provide the entire set of *Official Gazette* issues in a full-text searchable database, enabling Afghans to access the laws that govern them, but that they are often unaware. ACKU has addressed the general lack of accessibility to information in Afghanistan by digitizing a wide variety of documents, gaining expertise in digitization over the last 9 years by developing a large corpus of online documents accessible through the AfghanData collection (AfghanData, n.d.). ACKU is now applying this expertise to support the public accessibility of the *Official Gazette* and thereby improving public awareness and development of social justice. Eventually the project will include translations into English, as well as expanding coverage of other official governmental legal documentation. ACKU also provides workshops on accessing the documentation and social justice in general, to raise awareness of this tool and its relevance to the Afghan people.

This paper will present the current situation concerning social justice in Afghanistan and the lack of access to legal documents, to set the stage for presenting the ACKU Legal Collection project. The specifics of the project, including the process of digitizing the documents and the awareness workshops, will be described. Challenges faced and steps to address them, as well as future plans for evaluation and expansion of the project, will also be discussed.

**References**

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