

NGO UPDATE

To foster communication among human rights organizations around the world, each issue of the Human Rights Brief features an “NGO Update.” This space was created to aid non-governmental organizations (NGOs) by informing others about their programs, successes, and challenges. The views of the organizations below do not necessarily reflect those of the Human Rights Brief. For information on how to submit updates for your organization, please see the instructions provided at the end of the column.

AFGHANS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

www.afghansforcivilsociety.org

Afghans for Civil Society (ACS) is an organization that provides a democratic alternative to the violence and extremism that has emerged in Afghan society after decades of war. ACS encourages the development of civil society through democracy building, policy development, and independent media. By targeting its projects to narrowly defined regions, ACS initiatives have been able to achieve immediate and long-lasting results. Whenever possible, ACS programs are generated and directed by members of local communities to help ensure sustainability and success. Direct community involvement helps increase the number of stakeholders in Afghan society, making both male and female citizens feel they have a direct stake, not only in their own future and their communities’ futures, but in the future of Afghanistan.

ACS is involved in the economic and institutional development of Afghanistan in the hope of returning the country to a peaceful, productive, and democratic society. Since its inception in 2002, ACS has implemented various programs in five distinct areas, including women’s issues, public policy, reconstruction, education, and media, to achieve a comprehensive reconstruction of Afghan society. ACS believes political performance should be measured by improvements in citizens’ lives. By focusing on these five areas, ACS is addressing Afghanistan’s most critical needs.

ACS created the Women’s Income Generation Project (WIG) to improve the economic standing of Afghan women. The project focuses on educating Afghan women in skills such as fine hand-embroidery known as khamak. WIG also helps the women sell finished khamak pieces in markets that would otherwise be inaccessible to them, and then returns the profits to the women.

According to ACS, the most important element of civil society and democracy is a strong independent media. With support from the Carr Foundation and the Open Society Institute, ACS created *Afghan Azada Radio*, the first independent radio station in Kandahar. With a staff of well-qualified industry veterans, the radio station offers music, news, public affairs, Afghan history, and information on education and health issues. The station reaches a broad audience and has been crucial in rebuilding local businesses through advertising and promotions. Not only was the radio station the first to air a woman’s voice, but it has also won several awards for its programming and creativity. According to ACS, it is the only truly independent radio station in the province of Kandahar.

ACS is dedicated to achieving a peaceful and productive society in Afghanistan. Working across ethnic lines, gender, and tribal affiliations, ACS has been successful in achieving the broad public participation that it believes is necessary to build civil society. Through education, public policy, and independent media, ACS seeks to continue to provide hope that is crucial to a flourishing Afghan society.

If you would like make a donation to or otherwise become involved with ACS, you can do so at the organization’s website.

BALKAN INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING NETWORK (BIRN)

www.birn.edu.com

In 2005, the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) emerged from the Balkan program of the Institute for

War and Peace Reporting to become the premier investigative and analytical journalism organization in the region. BIRN addresses the need for objective, quality, and sustainable reporting on the region’s political and economic challenges, as well as those related to European Union integration. Consisting of a group of editors, trainers, and journalists, BIRN is an independent organization that has enabled journalists throughout the region to produce in-depth, analytical investigative reporting on key issues that the region is facing after decades of war. BIRN’s journalistic capacity has emphasized the importance of public debate and improving local media as a means of creating accountable and quality policy making.

Justice Report, BIRN’s war crimes project based out of Sarajevo, is a specialist reporting agency that focuses on war crimes trials before national and local courts, development of the local legal system, and efforts to come to terms with the Balkans, history of past abuses. By offering objective and reliable information on war crimes trials, Justice Report provides a support network for media, the general public, and displaced citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Justice Report is the only agency that provides comprehensive coverage of the War Crimes Chamber within the Court of BiH, while also analyzing, monitoring, and reporting on changes in the legal systems and alternative mechanisms for determining the truth about Bosnia’s past. Justice Report publishes a weekly magazine that contains all of the week’s reporting and sends the magazine via email to registered subscribers. If you would like to receive Justice Report’s magazine, you can register at www.bim.ba or contact Sarajevo Office Director Nerma Jelačić nerma@birn.edu.com.

BIRN’s mission is “to build and strengthen its interconnected cadre of journalists across the Balkans, analyzing key transitional issues and European integration for policy makers and the public at large.” All of BIRN’s members have an in-depth understanding and interest in the region, and the organization’s leadership

possesses expertise in a number of areas including human rights, transitional justice, post-conflict reconstruction, European integration, and political transformation. As a result, BIRN's main publication, *Balkan Insight*, provides a forum for actors in the region's development and the general public can communicate their messages, ideas, and solutions for the region. *Balkan Insight* is produced by local journalists across the region, who receive intensive mentoring and training from the BIRN's specialists. BIRN's training activities are intended to provide practical, on-the-job training to enthusiastic journalists, thereby ensuring the network's own sustainability, as well as the continuation of high quality investigative reporting in the Balkans.

BIRN's strategy is to keep local and international decision-makers, stakeholders, and the general public, reliably and objectively informed about the key political, economic, and social transitional dynamics of the region. By doing so, BIRN is creating a positive environment for the implementation of reforms. Ultimately, BIRN's work is not only a valuable addition to the media and journalistic community in the Balkans, but it provides a valuable example of the importance of high quality reporting and analysis in provoking debates at the regional and international level.

**EDUCA — SERVICIOS PARA
UNA EDUCACIÓN ALTERNATIVA
(SERVICES FOR AN ALTERNATIVE
EDUCATION)**

<http://www.educaoaxaca.org/>

EDUCA (Servicios para una Educación Alternativa) is a non-profit, non-governmental organization in the Mexican state of

Oaxaca that promotes community development and strengthens local organizational initiatives while educating indigenous communities about their civil and legal rights. According to EDUCA, chronic poverty and marginalization of indigenous communities breeds loss of hope. For this reason, EDUCA works to bring about a system of balanced participation by all members of society and, through such participation, improve the quality life of the poor and indigenous communities in the region.

EDUCA operates under the premise that the manner in which an organization carries out its work is as important as the ultimate goals of that organization. Accordingly, EDUCA begins each initiative with an in depth analysis of the economic, social, and political dynamics of the community. With each initiative, EDUCA also develops a specific set of techniques and participative dynamics that engages indigenous community leaders and generates social and political activity. During the final stage of these community initiatives, concrete actions transform the various communities' social, political, and cultural realities.

Concrete transformations within communities come about through the efforts of EDUCA's three principle programs. EDUCA's Building Citizenship Program focuses on promoting active citizenship and community development to fulfill basic human rights. The Building Citizenship Program works to help people develop an awareness of their rights to guarantee democracy, political stability, and accountability in Oaxacan municipalities. The second program, known as the Community Economics Program, promotes community organization and development by building on the skills that indigenous communi-

ties already possess. This program guides and supports community savings, loans, retail stores, and cooperative supply stores, thereby enabling indigenous communities to become self-sufficient. Finally, the Program of Municipalities and Indigenous Pueblos strengthens local governments through educational initiatives, training, improving administrative capabilities, and developing community-appropriate legislation.

A conflict between teachers' unions and the local government in Oaxaca emerged in May 2006. EDUCA was one of the first organizations to support the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) — an organization that assembled in response to the situation, encouraging citizens to be aware of and demand their rights. Emphasizing the importance of popular education as a vehicle for participation, EDUCA has also played a large role in organizing the Second Congress for Indigenous and Intercultural Education.

The popular education, civic organization, and increased political and social participation that EDUCA has worked towards are of paramount importance in today's Oaxaca. Director of EDUCA Marcos Leyva has stated, "We've struck a big blow to the political system in Oaxaca Many things are happening in our communities People are participating and becoming mobilized. We hope people continue participating, but it is tough. At this moment we are simply full of hope."

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