

# Inclusive Peacebuilding Approaches in Afghanistan

Research Report

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## Introduction

This research focuses on inclusive peacebuilding approaches in Afghanistan as carried out by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), with a focus on community and civil society participation, and partnership models in Afghanistan. The British & Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group was commissioned by one of its member agencies in June 2017, to undertake this study so that it can inform their peacebuilding approaches in Afghanistan.

The research was conducted between July–December 2017, during which 12 Afghan and international bodies including NGOs and Donors were approached. In the end, 15 staff from 10 organisations were consulted in Kabul and London. The study benefited from a literature review of current knowledge on the topic.

The paper begins with the definition of peace as defined by the respondents and then provides a brief contextual background about the drivers of conflict at the macro, meso and micro levels as well as an overview of the traditional dispute resolution mechanisms in the country. It then describes the variety of peacebuilding work carried out by the NGOs consulted including what impact they had, what challenges they faced, what approaches they adopted, how they chose target communities, how they recorded the impact and what risks these efforts involved. The concluding part of the report notes the lessons that have been observed so far.

## Definition of peace

Respondents suggested various definitions for peace and peacebuilding. Peace is thought to be equal to living in harmony and the co-existence of diverse groups, sexes, people with varying physical and mental abilities, and ethnic groups. It is acknowledged peace is a complex concept, covering many things related to economic, social, cultural, political and environmental rights; and therefore cannot be parochially seen as the absence of conflict only. The Sanayee Development Organisation (SDO) uses Johan Galtung's typology and categorises peace as positive peace (social peace) and negative peace (political peace), which is based on the view that whilst political processes can create some grounds for peace, it is only social peacebuilding that ensures lasting peace.

In this context, SDO views peacebuilding as "a bottom-up process whereby we address the root causes of lack of peace in conflict or post-conflict contexts. This includes filling the gaps that citizens face in economic, developmental, environmental rights." And the Afghan Women's Educational Centre (AWEC) views peacebuilding as the efforts to "ensure the continuation of harmony and transformation of conflict to improve lives".

These definitions view peacebuilding as a long-term process, rather than a single set of activities, encompassing various segments of society from individuals to national level, and enhancing peoples' resilience to remain peaceful in the face of increasing drivers of conflict.

## Drivers of Conflict

### Macro level

At the macro-level, one of the main drivers of conflict is regional and global interference. Geopolitical complications such as that posed by a tense relationship with Pakistan can increase instability in the country. The Western 'war on terror' sought to solve the multidimensional conflict by military means.

The changing nature of Western involvement from defeating terrorists to state-building to making peace with the Taliban changed the national and regional dynamics and created unpredictable alliances. This in turn affected the strategic objectives and behaviours of neighbouring countries like Pakistan and Iran and regional powers like China and Russia. More national and regional uncertainties were created with the drawdown of Western troops in 2014 and whilst more is expected in the aftermath of the new American strategy for South Asia. Apart from these security and political factors, regional competition over water resources, transit routes and longstanding border disputes remain points of contention and drivers of instability.

The war economy is a major destabilising factor: illicit economies such as drug and human trafficking generate revenues for armed opposition groups which directly benefit people in all parties to the conflict, including corrupt government officials.<sup>1</sup> Government Generals have also been known to misuse funds and the Taliban have been known to extort taxes.

According to the *Afghan People's Dialogue for Peace*, distrust between Afghan citizens and the government is one of the biggest obstacles to peace.<sup>2</sup> Governance failures and corruption in the justice and other sectors, allegations of fraud during elections, and extreme centralisation of power contribute to this distrust. Corruption and manipulation of past peace processes at the national and subnational levels, including by government actors, has led to the High Peace Council (HPC) involved in peace negotiations losing their legitimacy among the general public and 'reintegrated', for whom the government has been unable to provide protection.

An abundance of mineral resources in Afghanistan such as lapis lazuli, coal, and copper is a threat to peace as mining is thought to be the Taliban's second largest source of revenue.<sup>3</sup> Ethnic politics in the form of historic grievances and traditions of warlordism have been referred to as 'negative political rivalries'. Negative political rivalries are seen to be 'driven by memories of animosity and competition over power and resources between political factions that emerged as part of the Jihad against the Soviet invasion in the 1980s, as well as resistance against the emergence of Taliban rule in the mid-1990s.' and has serious implications for undermining government legitimacy.<sup>4</sup> New elements of religious extremism exemplified by Daesh have resulted in increased insecurity.

## Meso level

Meso-level drivers of conflict can be divided into three categories: human security issues, land disputes, and negative social norms.

Human security issues are one of the main drivers of conflict and can be some of the most difficult to overcome. Poverty and unemployment are two of the biggest factors leading to insecurity.<sup>5</sup> In 2016, Afghanistan ranked 169 on the Human Development Index, out of 188 countries.<sup>6</sup> According to the World Bank, a staggering 39% of the population lives below the poverty line with high levels living in chronic and severe poverty.

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<sup>1</sup> Afghan People's Dialogue on Peace (Afghan civil society organisations, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> War in the Treasury of the People (Global Witness, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Afghan People's Dialogue on Peace (Afghan civil society organisations, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Community Peacebuilding in Afghanistan (Oxfam, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Human Development Report (UN, 2016).

The latest figures show the unemployment rate reached 23% in 2014, with youth representing 46% of the total.<sup>7</sup> Current rates of unemployment are believed to be even higher. In a country where having large families is commonplace, unemployment and poverty can lead people to desperation and criminality, fuelling conflict and instability. In fact, the *Afghan People's Dialogue on Peace* highlighted that poverty and conflict are 'two sides of one coin', and found that extreme conditions of poverty, when combined with low education and literacy rates, leads 'already marginalised communities more prone to infiltration by insurgent groups.'<sup>8</sup> Other human security issues include environmental degradation and food security.

Gender-based violence and human rights abuses remain key hindrances to true and meaningful peace within communities.<sup>9</sup> Land disputes feature prominently as drivers of conflict and often affect women, marriage, or sexual relations.<sup>10</sup> Micro-level feuds over land can escalate to involve tribes and the wider community and in some cases ethnicity plays a role. Disputes between tribes, nomads, settlers, and villages over grazing rights and seizing of public/government land by powerful individuals, cause social instability. Conflict over land can also be related to access to resources, particularly water.

Negative cultural and social norms are another source of conflict. Lack of tolerance and social exclusion take many forms and can lead to harmful practices, abuse, violence, discrimination, and distrust within and between communities. Deepening ethnic and tribal conflicts remain a big concern since they drive broader conflict between the government and armed opposition groups as both parties seek to build alliances and use divisions to their advantage.<sup>11</sup> Ethnic conflicts can lead to injury, death and mass killings. Entrenched behaviour and a culture of entitlement claims by different groups and nepotism have added to the culture of mistrust and suspicion between groups. Negative traditions based on misleading Islamic and cultural interpretations undermine stability and are compounded by lack of both primary education and peace education. The protracted war has wrought damage on the Afghan culture, further exacerbated by tensions generated by the different ideas which Afghan returnees have picked up during their time abroad and brought back to their communities.<sup>12</sup>

### Micro level

Micro-level drivers, while often overlooked, are extremely important as they can easily snowball into feuds and violence that can last for years and even decades.

According to the 2017 Survey of Afghan People, the most common problems brought to formal and informal dispute resolution institutions during the year were land disputes (46%), family issues (20%), property disputes (11%); commercial disputes (9%), traffic accidents (8%), and divorce (4%)<sup>13</sup>.

Land disputes are the most common driver of conflict in the country. This is largely a result of informal land titles, customary land ownership, migration, including rural-urban movement, internal displacement, and returnees claiming their land has been occupied by someone else. Land grabbing by local powerholders is prevalent, as is illegal occupation of private land and inadequate boundary markers or property records make it even harder to resolve individual cases.<sup>14</sup> Other property issues

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<sup>7</sup> Afghanistan poverty status update (World Bank, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> *Afghan People's Dialogue on Peace* (Afghan civil society organisations, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Community Peacebuilding in Afghanistan* (Oxfam, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> *Afghan People's Dialogue on Peace* (Afghan civil society organisations, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> *Community Peacebuilding in Afghanistan* (Oxfam, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> *Survey of the Afghan People* (The Asia Foundation, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> *Land-based Conflict in Paktia Province* (The Liaison Office, 2008).

are related to inheritance such as claims made by widows and their families. Disputes related to inheritance can have detrimental consequences for women and girls who are used as bargaining chips to settle these issues. For example, in one case a young woman's grandfather forced her to marry her cousin for inheritance purposes. Her cousin already had a wife and eventually left the young woman without any means, failed to provide for her and denied her a divorce.

Family disputes encompass a range of issues including arranged marriages; multiple, forced or underage marriage; elopement and breaking with traditional marriage customs; dispute over dowries; *baad* (using marriage to settle an inter-family, inter-tribe or intra-tribe dispute); *badal* (exchanging women and girls for marriage between families); divorce; and inheritance. Family disputes can also be closely linked to land disputes. All of the above can result in conflict and while the preference is to find resolutions within the home in order to avoid a sense of shame and loss of honour, they can escalate quickly to involve tribes or communities.<sup>15</sup> The true extent of family disputes remain hidden as much goes unreported to formal and even district or sub-district informal resolution mechanisms.

Disputes over non-land property are as common as commercial disputes.<sup>16</sup>

### Traditional dispute resolution institutions

Most studies indicate that a great number of disputes are brought to traditional institutions in Afghanistan, such as *shuras* and *jirgas*. As with all data in Afghanistan, the figures range very widely; from 45–80% of all disputes being addressed by a *shura* or *jirga*. These disputes range from local land disputes to small-scale armed conflicts<sup>17</sup>. Residents of rural areas are much more likely to use *shuras* and *jirgas* (44.9%) than urban residents (33.4%)<sup>18</sup>.

*Shuras* are semi-permanent bodies composed of figures that enjoy traditional authority such as elders, religious leaders, *maliks* (landlords) and other respected members of the community. *Jirgas*, whilst sometimes used as the Pashto synonym for the Arabic word *shura*, can also be more ad hoc structures that address a specific dispute and its members can be semi-skilled dispute resolution experts.

In 2017, of those Afghans who reported using a dispute resolution institution in the annual Survey of the Afghan People, 43.2% said they use a village or neighbourhood-based *shura* or *jirga*; 39.5% report using state courts, and 21.4% say they went to the Huquq Department (Department of Justice). Based on the same survey, communities seem to trust the non-formal dispute resolution institutions more. Users of neighbourhood *shuras/jirgas* are more likely than users of other institutions to say (1) that the court is fair and trusted (82%); (2) follows the norms of the people (77%); and (3) is effective in delivering justice (74%).

Most respondents in our interviews were sceptical about the traditional *shuras* and *jirgas*. The long years of conflict have increased the influence of warlords in these structures, which tilts the verdicts in their favour. In areas threatened by the Taliban, many influential and impartial elders have left and those who remain there have to accept the Taliban's view of justice.

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<sup>15</sup> The Politics of Dispute Resolution and Continued Instability in Afghanistan (USIP, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> While commercial disputes are often referenced, we could not find any sources explaining what they are.

<sup>17</sup> Best Practices in Local Peacebuilding in Afghanistan (Oxfam, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Survey of the Afghan People (The Asia Foundation, 2017).

One respondent reported that even before the civil war, *shuras* and *jirgas* mostly sided with powerful male landlords. Such structures are criticised for perpetuating and institutionalising violence against women and violating the human rights of both men and women. Prominent examples include cases of *baad* or *badal*. The emphasis within *shuras* and *jirgas* is on community harmony, which is generally perceived to be achieved by arriving at an equitable settlement<sup>19</sup>, not necessarily on providing justice to the harmed individuals. As a result, the disputes can resurface again. The system, nonetheless works in certain conditions including when the community is small and has a homogeneous population<sup>20</sup>.

### Civil society's peacebuilding work

NGOs have been involved in peacebuilding since the mid-1990s when they were operating from Pakistan. Presently, in Afghanistan their involvement can be categorised under the following five sub-headings:

#### 1. Peace education

NGOs have been actively trying to spread peace education. SDO in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, has developed the subject of peace education as part of the national school curriculum and has piloted its teaching in 120 schools in four provinces. The aim is to change social norms among young people by eventually teaching peace education in all classes in primary, secondary and high schools. The analysis of results so far shows considerable positive effects on the students, teachers and families targeted. Schools have reported decreased levels of bullying, vandalism and physical fights among those students who have received the peace education. Teachers who received training on the topic have spoken about becoming more peaceful and tolerant in their own teaching practices. One teacher for example lamented his verbal, psychological and corporal punishment practices towards his students, after he received the training.

Parents and community members have also been very positive about the programme, saying that children behave better at home, fight less with siblings and friends, and indeed bring the concepts of peace education into the home and share them with other family members. Students have become peace ambassadors in their own homes.

In a similar vein, the Ministry of Education has worked with Help the Afghan Children (HTAC) to develop a peace education curriculum for grades 7-12. HTAC has since trained 1,800 teachers in Parwan, Kabul and Nangarhar provinces. A final decision to roll out the peace education subject nationwide will be made after an evaluation of the pilot programme is complete in early 2018.

The medium and long term impact of these initiatives will depend upon school enrolments, the quality of teaching methodology and pedagogy tools. Additionally, peace education will need to be streamlined across other subjects including religious education, literature and history.

Peace education has also received attention at the higher education level. Since 2014, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) has worked with public and private universities as well as the Afghan Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) to develop a peace and conflict studies curriculum that can be taught by universities across the country. The courses teach students practical life skills such as negotiation, problem solving, and active listening that they can apply in their everyday lives.

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<sup>19</sup> Clash of Two Goods (USIP, 2006)

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

USIP partnered with Gawharshad Institute of Higher Education, a private higher education academic institution in Kabul, to develop a curriculum-based peace and conflict studies course. In the spring of 2015, MoHE endorsed the curriculum to be taught as a two-credit course. Since then, additional universities have taken interest in developing a similar program. In 2016, USIP partnered with the public universities in Herat and Nangarhar. USIP now aims to scale up its peace education program by partnering with four additional universities.

Students that have taken the course have demonstrated increased civic participation in their communities through community outreach activities. USIP works to develop students' research skills through research methods workshops, field research, and contributing to the university's quarterly peace journal which includes articles and opinion pieces by students and faculty staff<sup>21</sup>.

## 2. Dispute resolution through Peace Councils

Afghan NGOs (ANGOs) have worked with international NGOs such as Oxfam and Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) to establish peace councils at the community and district levels across many provinces. These councils have a variety of compositions and NGOs try to include both genders in the councils. However, some peace councils are women only and some of them are composed of religious scholars only. For example, SDO has established about 600 peace councils composed mainly of *ulema* (religious scholars) in nine provinces with the aim of improving community resilience against conflicts and empowering existing social structures. These councils are designed to be as inclusive as possible. To avoid the potential inclusion of those involved in past human rights violations, a careful multi-step consultation takes place with various groups within the community to scrutinise and verify information about members.

Involving *ulema* in the peace councils has proven to be advantageous. For example, the Empowerment Center for Women (ECW)'s work with *ulema* in nine communities in Kunduz has resulted in the *ulema* championing women's social participation, and this has convinced other community leaders such as *maliks*, *khans*, landlords and paramilitary elements to accept the greater role of women in local *shuras*. This has had the positive effect of ensuring greater gender justice in the *shuras'* decisions.

An Oxfam-led project, Building Afghan Peace Locally (BAPL), established 77 community-based Peace Committees and eight district-level Peace Councils. The baseline to endline assessment of the project found that there were significant decreases in the reporting of disputes; 29% decrease in water disputes, 19% in legal disputes; 27% in poverty and unemployment-related disputes; 48% in water resource disputes; 5% in conflicts stemming from different religious beliefs and practices of the disputants, and 15% decrease in conflicts over customs or traditional practices in BAPL communities. Qualitative data provided some insights on a decline in the number of family disputes in the target areas.

The success of Peace Councils in a given area depends on several factors including security, social cohesion within that community, the nature, size and history of the disputes and the community's attitudes towards traditional dispute resolution mechanisms. In addition, the verdicts of Peace Councils are non-binding and individuals not satisfied with verdicts can pursue justice through formal mechanisms through provincial and central authorities, although these are considerably more time-consuming. Government's plans to create formal linkages between traditional dispute resolution mechanisms and formal community councils have been halted, without any known reasons. Informants from the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development said the government is still

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<sup>21</sup> Peace Education in Afghanistan (USIP 2017).



mulling over the idea of turning the Community Development Councils (CDCs) into village councils and granting them the authority to resolve such disputes. This may create further complexities as CDCs are envisaged as having many more development responsibilities under the Citizens' Charter Programme.

### 3. Awareness raising and capacity development

NGOs have provided a variety of learning programmes to community members with the aim of promoting peace and harmony and improving awareness about rights and laws. Recipients of this training are members of peace councils, *ulema*, youth, university students and ordinary community members including women. The training has been effective in improving local conflict resolution capacities. Sometimes warring communities have been invited to attend a training session together. After initial resistance from communities, they show signs of willingness and finally the very fact of sitting under the same roof can create space to speak about peace. For example, SDO reports that "two warring communities who have had historical disputes on irrigation water, and wouldn't meet each other without carrying weapons have finally made peace. These trainings must have prevented countless crimes and act of violence."

The learning programmes come in the form of structured training on communication, mediation, negotiation, and conflict analysis. The duration can range from half a day to 20 days. These skills are essential for members of peace councils to fulfil their functions. Examples from women-only councils and female members of mixed councils show that the newly acquired skills allow women to make a better analysis of conflicts and thus involve themselves more effectively in the councils' work. Such training is likely to have contributed to the wider conflict management at home and community levels as participants will probably share their knowledge with other family members and practice at home. SDO notes that a female participant transformed a long dispute with her husband after acquiring her new skill. During a usual squabble she remained calm and tried to mediate the disagreement by finding areas for agreement between her and her husband. She said this behaviour had an impact on her husband's behaviour and de-escalated the whole situation.

Sometimes the learning programmes include implicit methods, especially when targeting ordinary members of communities. AWEC taught art to working street children and then asked them to express what peace means to them. This resulted in a wealth of children's artistic impressions of peace. In another project, AWEC brought together women handicraft makers from various ethnicities, to contribute to an exhibition, the implicit objective of which was to facilitate space for interaction and to tackle ethnic stereotyping. The Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organisation has operated community theatres that promote both the documentation of human rights violations and truth-telling.

### 4. Advocacy for women's inclusion in peace

The Afghan Women's Network (AWN), which is the country's largest network of women-led civil society organisations (CSOs), monitors the progress in implementing the Afghanistan National Action Plan (NAP) for the implementation of the UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women and peace and security. The Afghan government passed the NAP for this resolution in 2015 with two implementation phases in 2015-18 and 2019-22. Findings from a mid-term review in 2018 of the progress and challenges will inform the implementation of the second phase.



AWN's monitoring is done through collecting data from key civil servants involved in the implementation of the NAP, and from civil society groups throughout the country. They publish their findings in Dari, Pashto and English which are broadly about:

- a) Participation: the quantity and quality of women's participation in the civil service, the security sector, the electoral bodies and in the entities engaged in the formal peace and reintegration process;
- b) Protection: gender mainstreaming and the implementation of the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) law and other policy instruments that protect women against violence and sexual harassment;
- c) Prevention: the participation of women in the judicial and legal sectors; and social mobilisation and awareness raising initiatives about violence against women; and
- d) Relief and recovery: a gender analysis of the national budget; support to women caught in humanitarian situations and improving job opportunities for women.

AWN's research identifies potential gaps in provision and makes recommendations to the relevant stakeholders, in the government and amongst international donors, for improving the implementation of the NAP. The area covered by the research is relatively wide. In its second annual monitoring report in 2017, AWN interviewed 300 civil servants across 25 provinces and conducted focus group discussions with civil society actors in eight regional centres.

AWN has been involved in advocacy efforts on women's issues, covered under the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, since its inception in 1995. It is also supported by international NGO coalitions outside the country on issues relating to women, peace and security. AWN has held several awareness raising sessions about UNSCR 1325 in various provinces. It therefore feels uniquely placed to support the implementation of the NAP, which is also recognised in their membership of NAP's Steering and Technical Committee. Responding to AWN and other women advocates' call for increased membership of women in the HPC, the Afghan Government appointed two of AWN's trustees as members of HPC's Leadership Council, and appointed AWN's Executive Director as member of HPC's Executive Committee. Seven other women were also appointed to the HPC, including Habiba Sarabi as the Deputy Chair of HPC. The Civil Services and Reform Commission has started a new recruitment programme that aims to increase women's participation in the civil services from the current 22% to 30% in two years.

Such measures come as a relief to those who suspect that women's rights achievements might be a casualty of high-level and male-dominated peace negotiations. However, critics consider these quantitative indicators as minimalistic and misleading, calling for both quantitative and qualitative yardsticks. Women's participation in public institutions are insufficient and sometimes ceremonial. Most government ministries have gender departments and gender policies in place, however, these departments are highly under-funded and under-developed, and only seek advice from women during key events like International Women's Day on 8<sup>th</sup> March or donor conferences. Notwithstanding these challenges, Afghan women have created a significant foothold for themselves in the Afghan institutions which could be further strengthened with continued advocacy.

#### [Integrating peacebuilding with broader development initiatives:](#)

NGOs have pursued peacebuilding objectives in projects including those for rural development, livelihoods and governance. They have incorporated peace training into their community mobilisation

efforts and support to street children and women; added livelihoods elements to their community level peacebuilding projects and ensured that the voices of community members inform governance projects at the community, district and provincial levels.

The aim of contributing to peace through improving governance is based on the premise that a lack of good governance, and of the provision of services, leads to conflict. Certain community members, particularly young people, who do not have access to decision-making bodies or to justice and feel that government bodies do not represent them, may take their grievances to the insurgents to resolve. To address this Oxfam and local partners Peace Training and Research Organisation (PTRO) and Afghanistan Public Policy Research Organisation (APPRO) have conducted a project called Citizens First which has established advocacy committees in Takhar, Nangarhar and Herat, at village, district and provincial levels. Plans are underway to establish a national advocacy committee. Analysis of the results so far shows that these committees have improved trust between community members and local government institutions and that community members have a better understanding of how public policy decisions in areas such as food security, public health, education and social security are made. A similar project by Oxfam in Pakistan resulted in local advocacy committees resolving longstanding community disputes, although no such evidence has surfaced in the Afghanistan project yet.

Respondents see a strong and direct link between livelihood projects and peacebuilding at the local level, as many of the micro level drivers of conflict are linked to a lack of jobs and resources. There is ever-increasing competition over resources such as water, irrigable land; and grazing areas in rural areas and livelihoods projects are effective in generating jobs and bringing communities together. In most cases it has been extremely difficult to get the community interested in the peacebuilding project without the livelihoods component.

## Identifying target areas and population

International donors and international NGOs (INGOs) play a key role in choosing the province(s) where peacebuilding projects are implemented as they are based on their strategic priority areas. ANGOs mostly choose the target districts and communities within a particular province and decisions are primarily related to security. Taliban-controlled areas are perceived to be too dangerous and areas that are threatened by the Taliban seen as too risky. There are exceptions however; ADA and ECW have conducted projects in Kunduz and Uruzgan, both of which have been attacked by insurgents in recent years. INGOs are purportedly better in having access to Taliban controlled areas.

Other factors are the advice received from communities as part of the consultation process; the ANGOs' overall organisational strategy and community acceptance. Within the scope of this study, it has not been possible to assess the type of consultations NGOs conduct with local communities before or during the design stage of the project.

## Approaches

NGOs believe their approaches are inclusive as they work with a variety of groups including women, youth, influential and non-influential members of the community, *ulema*, and grassroots organisations. Adopting a conflict sensitive approach has meant that ANGOs ensure that all relevant stakeholders in a community are consulted and involved in the project. Particularly in the case of peace councils, this approach helps in minimising potential errors which might result in ostracising any particular groups including vulnerable ones.

To the extent possible, NGOs make sure that the ethnic composition of the given community is reflected in their project activities and beneficiaries. One respondent said that in certain areas such as Nangarhar, it is not feasible to have women in a project because of conservative social norms.

NGOs reported explicitly or implicitly that they have a gendered approach which means that NGOs are sensitive to the needs of women. No one mentioned that a gendered approach also means that they are sensitive to the specific needs of girls, boys and men. Female headed ANGOs seem more confident about the participation of women in their projects and the active contribution of female members in peace councils. The Afghan Women's Skills Development Centre (AWSDC), which is led by a woman said at least 50% of their project beneficiaries are women and in one province female beneficiaries outnumber male ones (80 – 20%).

Most respondents said that they are aware of the Do No Harm concept and adopt its principles in their project design and community engagement. Other approaches mentioned are: empowering communities, improving project sustainability, and ensuring transparency with communities, partners and other stakeholders.

## Challenges

Peacebuilding projects face a number of general and specific challenges when it comes to implementation.

One key general challenge is security, which has recently been deteriorating throughout the country with the exception of certain provinces in the Central Highlands. Insecurity limits access to communities and puts implementing staff at high risk. This is particularly unfortunate for peacebuilding projects as the areas most affected by conflict are the ones which most need peace.

Women's participation in social projects in certain conservative communities can be a challenge. This can be mitigated by NGOs employing more female staff, but will also depend on factors such as levels of literacy, the openness of male members of a given community to women's involvement; whether the project needs women to have interactions with male staff and community members; and whether the work involves trips outside the community.

Another general challenge is the short term duration of projects and the expectation from donors of demonstrable, specific and quick impact. Donors, all of whom are international governments or INGOs, are accountable to the taxpayers and their own donors, and therefore feel the need to show that peacebuilding projects have been effective. Whilst this may be understandable it is unrealistic. Peacebuilding projects may aim at attitudinal and behaviour modifications and will therefore need more time to show real impact. In addition, projects are mostly one-off interventions with little or no follow-up. All this has put undue pressure on the implementers and slowed down progress towards attaining the long-term achievements of peacebuilding projects. It would be more helpful for donors to contribute to advocacy and to longer term projects, taking into account the positive results of evaluations undertaken to date.

Challenges that are specific to peacebuilding projects are:

- a) Donor interest in community level peacebuilding interventions has been low: donors have mostly supported the High Peace Council (the government entity working on negotiating a political deal with the Taliban) as the political settlement may promise enormous benefits for

stability. Secondly, donors in the last couple of years have focused on countering violent extremism and terrorism (CVET) and eliminating violent extremism and terrorism (EVET); so some NGOs which used to do peacebuilding at the community level have been working on CVET or EVET programmes instead. Within the scope of this project, it was not possible to study the differences between CVET and peacebuilding approaches; though it is known that CVET stems from the security and defence arena and therefore does not include the broader social, cultural and economic drivers of conflict. CVET by definition does not cover issues or geographical areas that are not related to violent extremism.

Notable donors for local peacebuilding project so far are: Trocaire, Cordaid, NCA, Open Society Afghanistan, Netherlands' Ministry of Foreign Affairs, United States Agency for International Development, and Department for International Development (DFID) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). With donor interest in multitrack approach increasing, more donors including Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) have shown interest in peacebuilding projects.

- b) Communities participating in peacebuilding projects expect some kind of physical assistance in return: Given the high levels of poverty and lack of jobs in the country, it is not surprising that communities taking part in peace councils or trainings need support that go beyond an intellectual commodity. Because of this most NGOs find peacebuilding projects can only be successful if they are run in conjunction with a project that has a tangible component such as livelihoods projects (for more on livelihoods, please see the sub-heading "[Integrating peacebuilding with broader development initiatives](#)").
- c) Collecting outcome level evidence for the peacebuilding project is difficult. (Please see more about this topic in the Recording Impact section)

## Risks

**Security:** Worsened insecurity across the country has increased the risk for any aid and charitable activity, exposing NGO staff to attacks by insurgents and criminals. For peacebuilding projects, security risks are even greater because of the potential confusion with the political peace process. Insurgents frequently target community elders or *ulema* that speak against their interpretation of Islamic teachings particularly on topics relating to human rights.

**Community resistance:** Traditional community leaders might feel suspicious about the inclusion of women and new leaders in the peace councils and therefore may encourage resistance. One ANGO reported that when they arrived to a community in northern Afghanistan for the second round of consultations, they had to stop because children in the streets were throwing stones at their cars. This was perhaps done with the approval of the elders in the community. They later found out that community leaders suspected that the work of the NGO would result in the female members of the community not listening to the male members anymore.

**Resistance from *ulema*:** Evidence shows that in certain communities *ulema* can be deeply suspicious about certain aspects of peacebuilding work and early negotiations with key *ulema* figures are necessary to overcome this tension. One ANGO reported that after the mixed gender peace councils were established in a community in northern Afghanistan, the *ulema* refused to sit with women in the

same room and suggested a curtain be placed between them. After a few sessions and speaking with women, they agreed to remove the curtain. Another story showed that *ulema* refused to take part in the training about the EAW law, which they deemed against Islamic teachings, and said they would disengage completely because the project was funded by a Christian organisation. To solve the problem, the ANGO held several meetings with key *ulema* figures to clarify the misunderstandings. At the end, they reached an agreement that although it is a Christian organisation, they respect the teachings of Islam and do not directly or indirectly preach Christianity. The EAW law training had to undergo some modification. It was held as a discussion on the EAW from the viewpoint of Islam, rather than a training.

### Recording impact

Recording impact of peacebuilding projects is not easy because of the nature and the duration of projects. Peace in a given community is related to a myriad of factors both inside and outside the community and peacebuilding projects may have long term impact trajectories that go beyond the life span of the project. For example, some years ago, President Karzai declared Parwan as the 'province of peace'. This is where one ANGO implemented community level peace projects; however, this is also because of the presence of Bagram prison in which international military forces had detained insurgents and President Karzai wanted to release them to pave the way for peace talks. It is therefore difficult to establish what weight could be given to what factor in Parwan becoming the 'province of peace'. Notwithstanding this difficulty, NGOs use a variety of tools that help them understand the effect of their projects. It is said that INGOs are better equipped to do so than ANGOs because they have more technical staff, better expertise and more resources.

NGOs conduct regular and end of project evaluations in the form of qualitative and quantitative evaluations. Qualitative evaluations include desk-reviews, reviews of project documents, in-depth interviews and/or focus-group discussions with key stakeholders, beneficiaries and project personnel and story gathering. Stories and reports are gathered using available tools such as SenseMaker and Sprockler software applications, testimonials, quotes and audio and video clips. Another evaluation technique is Outcome Harvesting, which collects evidence of what has changed and, then, working backwards, determines whether and how an intervention has contributed to these changes. Quantitative methods include baseline to endline assessments; indicator tracking cards; and the Logical Framework approach. Although the Logical Framework approach could be qualitative as well, it depends on the nature of the indicators.

### Lessons noted

1. Peace is a broad, multifaceted and long term process that includes all layers of political and social life. Building and sustaining peace therefore requires a multi-pronged and long term approach that is responsive to the major drivers of conflict in all the macro, meso and micro levels. In Afghanistan a lot of focus has been on the macro level, much to the expense of meso and micro levels. The current political conflict and the increasing insurgency in the country can be attributed to a variety of national and international factors, including the emergence of groups affiliated to the Islamic State (Daesh). However, insufficient support to families, communities and grassroots groups to resolve disputes sustainably and peacefully can increase tensions in urban and rural communities.

2. Partnerships between national and international NGOs are mutually productive in many ways. They can allow for greater sharing of knowledge that enhances partners' technical know-how and contextual understanding. Nonetheless, partnerships should allow for frequent communication using multiple modes and should not rely overly on the meetings between heads of agencies, or sharing of reports alone. As noted in this research, sometimes the directors of a given NGO may have not read their reports themselves. It is necessary that in the project design and evaluation, concerned staff from the main office and local offices or partnering organisations meet face to face.
3. It is better to link the peacebuilding efforts of CSOs with national institutions such as ministries of education, higher education, hajj and religious affairs and the like. This can on one hand improve the alignment of civil society's work with national and provincial priorities and on the other hand, allow CSOs to tap into the resources and capacities of national institutions. Most respondents of this study said the High Peace Council until recently has been viewed as "ineffectual" and a "waste of money". They thought working with HPC or their offices in the province can risk blurring the line between independent peacebuilding actors and government-sponsored ones.
4. Religious leaders hold varying degrees of influence over public opinion but it can be considerable and their role should be harnessed in projects from the very outset. *Ulema* have knowledge and authority hierarchies which should be understood and so should the internal rivalries between them. Evidence shows that speaking to influential *ulema* leaders on potentially controversial topics can solve many problems related to their resistance to the project. It should be acknowledged that certain *ulema* may have anti-women interpretations or attitudes that can jeopardise the impact of the projects. Adequate time should be allotted to the project design and preparation phase to identify the right partners within the *ulema*.
5. Unemployment and lack of economic opportunities are often cited as key drivers to conflict at meso and micro levels. Peacebuilding projects that reduce poverty, improve livelihood prospects and bring warring communities together over a joint economic value can be effective as they tackle this driver in a visible way.
6. Communities and their social, political, cultural and economic dynamics can be different even when they are part of a homogenous district. It is therefore necessary to understand these dynamics and the information networks before engaging with them. Gender specific need assessments and context analysis are required to improve women and girls' participation in projects. Such analysis should also consider the specific needs of men and boys. Culturally-sensitive approaches and communication approaches should be used in training, which includes consideration of the concepts of masculinity and femininity in the given community. Peacebuilding theories and approaches should be adequately contextualised. Working with trusted local NGOs or grassroots organisations is effective. Programmes should be designed to be flexible and accommodating of the local variables, which in some communities change rapidly.
7. Existing local structures such as tribal *shuras*, *jirgas*, and CDCs are key players in keeping the local peace. However, caution should be paid in understanding the history of these local entities and their past decisions. Some *shuras* and *jirgas* are completely male dominated, and

are accused of making rulings that are misogynistic and/or violate human rights. CDCs, under the Citizens' Charter programme, which is the successor of the National Solidarity Programme, have been given a wider mandate of making development decisions on rural development, health, education and the like. Members of CDCs are elected and trained to make these decisions however their mandate and size are different from peace groups at the local level. The election process leading to their establishment create certain political and social tensions which render them incapable in trying to resolve disputes. They are therefore not the effective interlocutors on peace issues. Also giving them additional responsibilities might affect the quality of their work.

8. Some Afghan communities and *ulema* can be suspicious about the work of international faith-based agencies, thinking they preach non-Islamic religious beliefs. It is advised that faith-based charities should continue to keep a low profile in their branding in Afghanistan and doesn't use a full version of its name, and instead use only its logo.





## Abbreviations:

ANGO	Afghan Non-Government Organisation
AWEC	Afghan Women's Educational Centre
AWN	Afghan Women's Network
AWSDC	Afghan Women's Skills Development Centre
BAPL	Building Afghan Peace Locally
CDC	Community Development Councils
CSO	Civil Society Organisations
CVET	Countering Violent Extremism and Terrorism
ECW	Empowerment Center for Women
EVAW	Elimination of Violence against Women
EVET	Eliminating Violent Extremism and Terrorism
HPC	Afghan High Peace Council
HTAC	Help the Afghan Children
INGO	International Non-Government Organisation
MoHE	Afghan Ministry of Higher Education
NAP	National Action Plan
NCA	Norwegian Church Aid
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
SDO	Sanayee Development Organisation
UNSCR	United Nations' Security Council Resolution
USIP	The United States Institute of Peace



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