



FROM VIOLENCE TO DIALOGUE

YOUTH-LED DISPUTE RESOLUTION IN PAKISTAN

TRIBAL CONFLICT IN PAKISTAN

The Newly Merged Districts¹ in Pakistan are predominantly home to the Pashtun tribes. For centuries, society in these areas has been organised around tribal affiliation with tribal elders responsible for the administration of justice and dispute resolution. Serious disputes within and between tribes were managed by the traditional Jirga (council of tribal elders), however this was not always very successful or effective with tribal elders sometimes accused of corruption, bias, or simply lacking in skill or knowledge. As a result, inter-tribal relations became marked by cycles of violence and aggressive pursuits of power. Outside actors took advantage of this animosity in the 1990s and 2000s to build their own power bases, which drastically increased violence and insecurity in the area, resulting in war with the Pakistan Army.

The war in north-west Pakistan caused great social, political and economic upheaval, including the temporary displacement of over 5 million people from 2008 for almost ten years, and eventually led to the merger of the tribal areas into the full governance system of Pakistan. Although the formal Pakistani

justice system and alternative dispute resolution system are being rolled out across the newly merged districts, traditional systems of conflict management and dispute resolution in Pashtun society remain the cheapest and most accessible to local communities. Most people believe it is undignified to air their grievances outside the Pashtun community and prefer to settle their differences using the traditional Pashtun system, the Pakhtunwali. However, a baseline study for Islamic Relief found that problems with the Jirga continue and inter-tribal relations are still characterised by mistrust, suspicion and aggression as a result of the war and tensions over ownership of water, land and forest resources.

VIOLENT CONFLICT OVER LAND AND A COAL MINE

Two sub-tribes (called X and Y here to protect their identity) in north-west Pakistan have been arguing over land and ownership of a coal mine for around 35 years. Sub-tribe X, with 860 households, is more than twice the size of sub-tribe Y, with 350 households, and it had deployed one of its members to guard the land and coal mine. In February 2021, conflict flared up again when the night guard was attacked and killed





Jirga meeting to resolve the dispute.
[Photo: Islamic Relief, 2021]

by sub-tribe Y. Tensions between the two groups remained unresolved by the tribal elders and police. Sub-tribe Y went on to attack some of the households of sub-tribe X, burning 17 houses to the ground and firing guns which killed three men and injured others. As a result, women and children moved to safer areas and the injured people were taken to hospital. Protestors demanding justice then blocked a main road.

YOUTH GROUP'S SHUTTLE DIPLOMACY

The very next day after the attack, a community youth group comprised of younger, male members from all of the sub-tribes, went to meet with each disputing group separately in a process of 'shuttle diplomacy'². At first they were told that it would be useless trying to intervene because it is a serious issue between two sub-tribes which the Jirga and elders failed many times to settle. Although they were fearful, the youth group had been working with Islamic Relief on community

social cohesion since 2019 and had recently received training in dispute resolution, so they felt motivated to help resolve the dispute. The youth group went to meet the conflicting tribes, where they were received very respectfully. Elders from the tribes had also been supported by Islamic Relief to sensitise them on the importance of the role of youth in dispute resolution and their inclusion in decision making processes, so they were receptive to the youth group's overtures and allowed them to negotiate towards a peaceful dialogue.

The youth group explained their intention to support the resolution of the dispute to re-build peace in the local area, which had long been disturbed by animosity between the two sub-tribes. They also explained their concerns around the consequences of conflict, reminding both sides of the recent protracted displacement and the importance of peace. Finally, they demonstrated their key messages with peace slogans written on flipcharts.

AGREEING THE TERMS OF PEACEFUL DIALOGUE

The youth group reached agreement with both sub-tribes to engage in peaceful dialogue within a Jirga until the dispute has been resolved and a sustainable solution is reached for fair ownership of the land and coal mine. The youth group also negotiated the payment of PKR 5 million by each side as a bond, or Tega³, to guarantee restraint from violence during the peace process. Finally, the youth group persuaded the area's elders and influential people to allow them to be involved in the Jirga peace process so that they could help to find a peaceful, sustainable solution to the dispute.

ISLAMIC RELIEF'S SUPPORT TO SOCIAL COHESION IN PAKISTAN

While the dispute resolution process is underway, the youth group in this case study remarked on the value of the dispute resolution and social cohesion training and follow-up coaching provided by Islamic Relief to youth groups, community and village organisations, and elders in the area. They would like the support to continue and be replicated in other remote areas of the newly merged districts where mistrust and grievances still impact upon local social cohesion and stability.

Islamic Relief's support to the rebuilding of conflict-affected communities, livelihoods and social cohesion in the newly merged districts of Pakistan was implemented through a Sida-funded Triple Nexus Programme in 2018-2021.



Elders and youth group members showing peace messages drawn up by the youth group to promote peaceful dispute resolution [Photo: Islamic Relief, 2021]

THEORY OF CHANGE

- Peace will come through transformative attitudinal and behavioural change of a mass of individuals, particularly women and youth, and key institutional partners.
- Peace will emerge through the breaking down of isolation, polarisation, division, prejudice and stereotypes within and amongst groups.
- If we mobilise enough support for peaceful resolution of disputes and for promotion of tolerance, then political leaders will listen and take action.
- If formal and informal institutions within government, civil society and the private sector perform in an effective and responsive way providing reasonable livelihoods, stability and quality of life then the extent of core grievances and conflict would decline.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Previously called the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, FATA

2. '*Shuttle diplomacy*' is when an intermediary, mediator or negotiator travels between disputing groups who are reluctant to meet each other face to face.

3. *Tega* (meaning '*stone*' in local language) is a customary bond used by the local people to restrict violence and encourage the conflicting parties to remain calm during the peace negotiation process. It is usually currency or weapons deposited with Jirga members.



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