

## **RELIGION, COMMUNITY RESILIENCE, AND THE POLITICS OF DEVELOPMENTAL PROJECTS: A CASE OF PASHTUN SOCIETY OF PAKISTAN BORDERING AFGHANISTAN**

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### **Abstract**

*The historical legacies, religion, culture, interpretation without contextualisation, conspiracy theory as a religious blik, misinformation, and misconceptions, are factors that lead to community violence against development programs/projects and their workers. For this purpose, a socio-theological approach in this paper is adopted to understand the epistemic worldview, the mindset of the clerics, and the masses who oppose these development programs/projects. A mixed-methods approach with qualitative and quantitative data was adopted for this study, carried out in the Pashtun areas of Northern Pakistan. The findings shows that the success of the development program/project depends on ' 'society's clear perceptions of these projects. These programs cannot achieve their goals if people have misconceptions. In Pashtun society, clerics remain the source and perpetrators of misperceptions about the development projects, exploiting anti-western sentiments, spreading conspiracy theories, questioning the morality of aid programs and workers, and posing these developments as a Trojan horse of weakening the sociocultural values of Pashtuns.*

**Keywords:** Pashtuns, Development programs, Clergy, Resilience, Violent extremism, Ex-FATA, Pakistan

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## **Introduction**

The development programs are often accused of having a covert agenda, hence, their role in uplifting communities by providing them with humanitarian assistance is primarily ignored (Provost, 2013). In most cases, the development organisations do not function as part of the government structure and are broadly categorised as non-government organisations (NGOs). NGO, however, refers to a range of 'private voluntary organisations, 'civil society 'organisations' and 'non-profit organisations (NPOs), including both religious and secular forms (Woldehanna, 2005). The services provided by these not-for-profit development organisations include poverty eradication, livelihood, human rights, health, education, advocacy, disaster relief, and during the war (Kirk, 2006). Besides, development programs include 'refugees' settlements, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution (Healy, 2001). Moreover, the development organizations are also called 'gap 'fillers' because they fill the gap created by weak state institutions by taking responsibility for and functions of the state. While some scholars believe that these development organisations replace the State (Bano, 2008; Bradley, 2006; Kamat, 2003), they consider these organisations as flexible, apolitical, effective, and innovative, which argues and complements weak state institutions (Beath, 2015; Roff, 2004; Ulleberg, 2009). The last century witnessed an enormous growth of these organisations worldwide, especially in South Asia. Development organisations in Pakistan have existed since independence (1947), primarily involved in providing humanitarian aid to refugees pouring into the newly independent state of Pakistan.

However, community perceptions of development organisations and their workers vary according to the region and context. In Iraq, for example, the organisations working on development projects like roads and bridges have been perceived as an extension of Western military power and have been thus resisted (Anderson, 2009; Smael, 2011). In this example, there was widespread anti-development organisation perception in the community, blaming NGOs as western agents to promote western values and modernism. The development projects that do not challenge the local values and culture of Pashtun society and thus focus on repairing infrastructure

like roads and providing clean water and sanitation have been welcomed though curtly; only those projects on women's rights challenging the local norms and values have raised community's defences against invasion on the Pashtun culture.

Nevertheless, Sachs (2000) identifies several factors of geography, i.e., landlocked, volatile neighbourhood, and lack of access to resources are considered fundamental factors that affect development. Easterly (2006) discusses the heavy burden on Africa associated with the historically arbitrary demarcation of international borders. However, the local community, mainly traditional societies such as Pashtuns, may feel a threat by the development projects perceiving them as one way of imposing western values and culture: hence, suggested enculturation of the development program as per the local community culture (Illich, 1968 and Kamat, 2002). In the presence of historical legacies of resisting western hegemony, it is challenging to study the community approach toward development projects in Pashtun society. While doing so, the paper examines the pertinent reasons for anti-development sentiments in Pashtun society in an in-depth manner.

The international and national aid in Pashtun areas of Pakistan traditionally remained highly motivated and controversial among the nationalist and religious Pashtun (Husain, 1979). The presence of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan had drawn Pakistan into the fold of US-led alliances. In essence, most projects funded by the West were driven to yield a political harvest of seeding and enhancing antagonism to the Soviet Union (Edwards, 2002; Rizvi, 1984). As the Pashtuns straddled the Durand Line, they had a good rapport with the political leadership in Afghanistan; therefore, the US and allied forces used Pashtun land to counter Soviet influence in Afghanistan through hosting of refugees and training mujahideen to fight in Afghanistan. Historically, the Saur revolution in Afghanistan in 1979 had a lasting impact on Pashtuns. The revolution coincided with the rise of General Zia ul Haq in Pakistan, who legitimized his rule by mobilising religious sentiments and strengthening the religious parties in Pakistan (Shah, 2012). The exact reflection appears in the recent operation for curbing militancy and establishing the state's writ in the tribal regions as security trumps

other considerations, such as the need for development and effective governance (Dawar, 2021).

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

In the historical context of Pakistan, the role of religion has been considered pivotal since ancient times and for a long, religious consideration played a dominant position over political gains. Major world religions teach aid and support of the poor as a commendable human trait (Marshall, 2004). Religion usually plays a vital role in the impact and sustainability of aid work in developing countries (Fountain, 2013). Asad (2003) highlights that aid and development activities in Muslim countries consider secularism imperative. The aid reports and audits present it as an evil impediment when they encounter religious factors shaping sociocultural norms and political realities. However, the element of religion cannot be simplistically added to the analysis of the politics of development; its role is often multifaceted, covert, and complex. Researchers need to contextualise the religion, development, and political linkages and view it in a historical, social, and cultural context in such a way that the delicate and indirect implications are not ruined and deformed when analysed through the appropriate tool of analysis (Fountain, Bush, & Feener, 2015).

This paper uses a socioecological approach, a theoretical framework for understanding violence against development programs and projects. Roland Robertson applied the term Sociotheology in the 1970s to explain violence against development projects. Being an interdisciplinary approach, sociotheology discusses the renewal of the social aspects of religion in response to the prevailing secularization thesis, especially by sociologically inclined theologians. It recognises that religion can be inherently a part of public life, and thus politics has a religious side. The socio-theological approach promotes an epistemic worldview which explains that the object of analysis is not things, actions, beliefs, or persons but epistemic worldviews: the ways that participants in a particular religious perspective view the world.

Mona Kanwal Sheikh and Mark Juergensmeyer (2013) have tried to explain the sociotheological framework in understanding broader contexts and religious violence. Sheikh (2013) systematically

explains different steps of the method of the sociotheological model for the understanding of violence in the shape of a template, which includes: determining and entering into an epistemic worldview, connecting assumptions about the truth of a worldview, conducting informative conversations, identifying narrative structures, and locating social contexts. 'Sheikh's approach provides a template for understanding religious worldviews:

1. Demarcation helps identify a particular worldview with which the members commonly agree.
2. Bracketing the assumptions about truth. A detached objective identification of the logic and truth is laid down.
3. Empathetic Immersion. The analyst puts themselves in the subject's position under the study and adopts an 'emic' perspective.
4. Identification of narrative structure happens next, employing flexible interviews.
5. Locating the social context. A concentric circle approach is used to associate patterns and understand social configuration.

These aspects are used to analyze the worldview in light of the sociotheological study of Pashtuns' perception of development projects.

### **Research Methodology**

A mixed-method approach (qualitative and quantitative) with comparative-historical methods, combined with an interpretive understanding, is adopted to understand the relationship between religion, politics of development, and violence in Pashtun society and how these factors influence 'people's perceptions of development projects. A mixed method design is selected since it appropriately answers the questions. Creswell (2012) supports mixed method design to capture the wide range of quantitative and qualitative information to potentially address the gap in the data gathered through quantitative methods. The quantitative part will capture the community's opinions about the development projects, while the qualitative part investigates the in-depth contextual factors responsible for resisting the development projects in Pashtun society.

## Data Collection

A sample of 768 respondents has been selected for quantitative data collection from the overall population of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Merged District (KPMD) (i.e. former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (ex-FATA) 5,001,676 persons (Govt. of Pakistan, Population Census 2017). The sample size was selected through the Proportionate Stratified Random Sampling Technique (PSRS) based on the statistical formula  $N = z^2 (P (1-P)/e^2)^1$  (Thompson 2012; Ryan, 2013) by a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error. Out of total 768 respondents, an overall 478 (62%) were male while the rest were female 290 (38%) (**Table – 1**). There is an evident difference between the reference by age, area, rural-urban, qualification level, and other demographic characteristics.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, qualitative data has been collected through field interviews and focused group discussions on filling the gap in data gathered through quantitative questionnaires and validating the information. Primary data (qualitative) has been collected through a detailed open-ended interview schedule with experts, academicians, religious leaders, political parties, members of NGOs, and faith-based organizations, to probe and identify the parameters of the relationship between politics of development, religion, and violence. A total of 20 experts and stakeholders have been selected through non-probability sampling, including purposive, convenience and snowball sampling techniques. Additionally, eight Focused Group Discussions (FGDs)

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<sup>1</sup> In this Formula **N** is total number/sample size; **Z** is Confidence level i.e. 0.95 (95%). Its value is (1.96); **P** represents the extent of variation in the entire population and is equal to (0.5) but usually P (1-P) is equal = (0.25); **E** Margin of error i.e. 5% of error is allowed, so we have e = (0.05). Based on this formula, the sample size calculated will be as below:  $n = (1.96)^2 (0.5) (0.5) / (0.05) = 384$  (minimum sample size)

<sup>2</sup> The main themes developed in the theoretical framework are highlighted and focused while presenting the quantitative data, instead of presenting the data in disaggregating form analyzing it on the basis of age, rural-urban, qualification. Rather the quantitative data has been presented in aggregated form.

have been conducted to triangulate and verify data gathered through interviews.

## **Results and Discussion**

The data has been analyzed inductively without trying to fit with previous conceptualizations or research in this area (Patton, 1990). The analysis followed processes and principles common to a thematic analysis by closely examining the data to identify common themes, topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly and are guided by principles shared with the interpretative phenomenological approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Smith et al., 1999) as the research aimed to make sense of the 'participants' experiences and views expressed during qualitative interviews and FGDs. While the qualitative data were analyzed with the help of some questions mentioned below, the quantitative analysis was carried out using simple descriptive statistics such as frequencies.

The qualitative analysis focused on the following questions:

- What are the people's views about development programs/projects and their workers?
- Do they express negative or favourable comments/perceptions about their localities' development programs/projects?
- If people have any negative perceptions about the development programs/projects, what are the basis of these misperceptions?
- What are different themes/frames/dimensions in their views regarding development programs/projects?

The study's results show that suspicion against development programs/projects is widespread at the national level, especially in the Pashtun tribal districts of Pakistan. The empirical data shows that in the context of Pashtun society, religious beliefs and cultural factors shape opinions about development programs in complex ways. Religious aspects are, however, long ignored or treated gingerly, more often in the "problem" category than the "solution" category. The findings have been analysed to understand the role of religion and culture in development, both to demystify and to document widely diverse engagement. Following the theoretical framework of the sociotheological approach, this paper further identifies a broader

context of negative perceptions about development programs/projects under the main themes identified and categorised during data analysis. These themes raised from the data explain how Pashtuns have negative perceptions of development programs and organizations. Based on secondary data review and primary data (quantitative and qualitative) obtained during the field, the themes generated/developed are discussed below.

### **Theme - 1: Pashtun Local Worldview and Development Programs**

According to the sociotheological approach, it is essential to identify the epistemic worldview of Pashtuns. The borders of the Pashtun worldview are diffused and overlap with other perceptions of religion-culture and social reality. Generally, the NGO sector in Pakistan, particularly in Pashtun areas, currently faces several issues, including misperceptions, hate, derogatory behaviour, and violence against them (Jamal and Baldwin, 2019; Kahlon, 2015). Historically, the Pashtuns of the North-West Frontiers of the subcontinent always resisted foreign invaders entering their area (Ali and Subhan, 2020). Since Alexander, all the local people resisted foreign invaders in the subcontinent, especially the North Western Pashtun people, valued their independence and actively resisted external interference (Misdaq, 2006). This resistance to foreign invasion and intervention that tried to disturb tribal freedom and free tribal life remained even after the creation of Pakistan, after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and later in the wake of the U.S. attack on Afghanistan. The legacy of resisting foreign intervention continued even against any development intervention due to the fear of losing their freedom and cultural norms. Thus, the British colonial relationship and tactful dealing with the Pashtun tribal people of Northern Pakistan created a permanent image of mistrust in their minds. Even today, any project in the shape of foreign intervention, especially western intervention, is considered the legacy of western imperialism and responded with anti-colonial resistance. They are now found in the form of anti-western feelings and sentiments in the ordinary people and community leaders, especially religious leaders (clerics); hence, doubting any modern intervention as the Western agenda.



The epistemic worldviews are conceptual entities and thus are tied to social realities. The Pashtun have shared the anti-western worldview since their anti-colonial resistance. Thus, in the tribal Pashtun areas, the people have their old colonial times mentality toward development projects. Most respondents (61%) believed that the development project was nothing more than enslaving them, curbing and restricting their independence (**Table – 2**). The roads construction, schools, and other such facilities mean the entering of state to them. The state in the tribal Pashtun areas had no previous contact; thus, there remained a wide gap between the state and the tribal Pashtun society. This mistrust will take time, and thus any intervention is looked at with doubt.

During an interview with an expert, it was recorded,

Still, there remains a big gap between the government and tribal society. To date, the influential tribal elders, Malaks, exploit the local tribal common masses. Even the government development projects did not reach the people but were always got the fruit of development projects by the chosen few in the tribal Pashtun society. Thus, there is a gap and mistrust between the tribal people and the state, and the familiar tribal people have not tasted the benefits and fruits of these projects. The common masses still consider and look at these development programs with doubts. The state had not previously directly interacted with these people. So, today with the direct intervention of the state in their areas is not accepted by heart but is allowed due to fear of military and state coercion. Somehow, the large-scale internal displacement of the local people due to the militancy followed by military operations also plays a vital role in their changed behaviour towards the development projects (**Interview 5, FGD 3**).

Since 'Pakistan's inception (1947) and especially during the 1980s, the hate and resistance against secular NGOs have increased significantly and continue to grow; still, a strong polarisation exists

between religious and modern 'secular' organizations. (Pasha, 2003) The propaganda against these development programs was highly dramatised, especially by clerics, that even a familiar uneducated rural Pakistan, especially Pashtun, felt negative and pessimist feelings about NGOs. Because in the religio-cultural context, the amalgamation and mixing up of women & men are considered prohibited. Women working in development programs and their free movements during field visits while working in development programs/organisations made the local community apprehensive. They thus started resistance against the development programs that are propagating vulgarity. **Most respondents (70%)** had negative perceptions of NGOs, calling them Western agents, working to distract people from their faith, and being doubted as an evangelist (**Table - 2**) because they are funded by the West, primarily the Christians and Jews. 'That is why people doubt these organizations.

During an interview with a local elder, who is also the founder of a local Community Based (Development) Organization (CBO), told:

The local Pashtun tribal people are so pessimistic about the NGOs that they doubt any development work/activities in their localities that bear a name other than a government department. The term NGO has had so many negative and bad reputations that it is equated and looked similar to infidels, agents, or a stigma. The word NGO itself is so derogatory that anyone working in an NGO/development program is considered an agent of the west/Jews or a modernized who is almost out of Islam. One cannot show or say with ease in the local community that he is an NGO worker because those related to NGOs are considered agents of the West, and thus the very term NGO has become a stigma in the local community (**Interview 1**).

The respondents (70.2%) view the common people fear NGOs so much that they even do not engage in volunteer work if it is rumoured to be

linked with any NGO. Neither the development sector workers nor development jobs are liked by the people (81%).

During the field interview, a development worker in Peshawar said:

We cannot even hang a signboard with the name of our organization at the gate of the building of our organization for several reasons: fear of being targeted by a militant group, the community people's apprehension that why there is an NGO office in their locality and many other such reasons that risk our security (**Interview 6**).

While interviewing international NGO workers, experts, and women rights activists, she said:

That the negative perception about NGOs and their workers is not only a problem in Pashtun society but is a shared national dilemma, one has heard the broad derogatory words and terms on TV channels, 'NGOs Aunti's, etc. If we work for human rights or speak up for the rights of disposed and oppressed women, the people do not hesitate to call us terms and words such as NGO 'aunties,' western spies, etc. (**Interview 7**).

One of the leading human rights activists and founder of a women's development NGO, which is famous all over Pakistan, said,

I cannot go to my village, where I belong. Even on occasions of death or the wedding of close relatives, I cannot visit my village. I receive frequent calls and life threats from terrorists and local militants because I am running an NGO working to develop and empower women (**Interview 11**).

## **Theme – 2: Religion and Development Programs**

Conventionally, development is identified with two broad terms: development as what happens and development as what is done. The first considers development as a historical process of economic and social change linked with modernity, while the second considers development associated with aid, international intervention, public

policy, official agencies, and NGOs working for social transformation and economic development.

Concerning development and religion nexus, religion is reflected as harmful in South Asia in social writings. Thus, it is a hindrance in the modernization process, a source of conflict & division in society, and a hurdle in forming a secular state and development (Searle-Chatterjee, 2003). In traditional societies like Pashtun tribal areas, development and development programs are often understood and deemed (91%) modernization. They are thus doubted for the spread of and promulgation of the Western culture, vulgarity, and threat to local Pashtun culture, as these organizations/programs often ignore local customs and traditions, especially about women and other culturally sensitive issues (**Table – 2**).

One of the interview respondents said:

While working in the local community, especially the Pashtun community, any development organization/program must know local faith, language, values, culturally sensitive issues (reproductive health, condoms/HIV, gender), and the link between religion and politics and attitude toward religious minorities. The development programs/organizations should care for these and should not treat these obstacles as insoluble. The development programs should openly adopt the best strategy to involve and work with local religious stakeholders/leaders to find a constructive solution for these differences. While working in Pashtun tribal society, the best strategy is to cooperate rather than agree to differ (**Interview 4**).

### **Theme – 3: Religion and Politics: Clerics in Pashtun Society**

The apparent goal of Religion and Politics is the acquisition of power to fulfill their aims. Religion gets public support by inspiring people's religious feelings to get power, while politics manoeuvre public support to get power using tricks, diplomacy or take over power through force, depending on the type of society. Hence, there is always an interplay

between religion and politics to grab power. The religion claims its derivation from divinity, thus determining authority on divine laws, with no intervention by humans, aiming to fulfill the holy mission of motivating society under spiritual guidance. While politics, on the contrary, is based on a secular approach, having no place for value, guides its policy on the pragmatic approach of adaptation, adjustment, and change according to the arising challenges of time to fulfill society's requirements and needs.

The religious scholars (Ulama, men of Islamic learning) hold pertinent positions and status in Muslim society, especially in Pakistan. Though, at the time of independence, the very title of the new state reflected the State-religion relationships in Pakistan. However, practically the body of common law is based on English Common Law which is secular. Constitutionally, no laws would be repugnant to Islam as being the state religion. From the day first, the religion and religious leaders got a prominent position in the affairs of the Pakistani state (Articles 22 – 231, Constitution of Pakistan 1973).

Similarly, in Pakistan in general and particularly in Pashtun society, the clerics have a dominant role as the people follow them and follow the worldview constructed by these clerics. Most respondents (87%) think they follow their religious leaders and look at them when there is any socio-economic or political event. The respondents (75%) further added that they receive an explanation of the event from their religious leaders during weekly sermons. These religious leaders tell us that the Muslims are under threat; the cunning West is after them whenever anything happens. The clerics warn us that through various tactics, the West wants to reduce the influence and number of Muslims worldwide (**Table – 2**).

The Sociotheological theory expositis that identifying the narrative structures can indicate a particular religious mode of justification behind any act, explanation of the social reality, or an aspect of a worldview. Analyzing the narrative structure reveals religion's role in justifying and understanding the act/worldview.

During the field interview, an expert said:

The clerics are great power holders in the local society, as they are street power holders. They control the masses and their minds through their views. Their biases limit their views about the world and everything in society, whether of social, economic or political importance. They have limited worldviews of the socio-economic and political world. Though they have somehow religious education, they often lack modern education and knowledge of science and logic. They explain to each other, even in society, through their limited worldview and thus advise the people what to do. **(Interview 3)**.

A moderate religious scholar said:

The clerics have their narrow worldview and thus interpret everything according to this view without knowing the broader context either of the issue or religious knowledge. Their interpretation is often without contextualization, primarily based on folk or popular religion, superstitions, doubts, conspiracy, and misconceptions. This way, they get public attention and public sympathy, who are also followers of folk religion. This way, they control the minds of their followers, the common masses. Moreover, they interpret political events, scientific things, diseases, medicine-related issues, and vaccination as per their limited worldview. They also misinterpret religious tenets without contextualizing them **(Interview 2)**.

#### **Theme – 4: Clerics Worldviews versus Modern Worldviews**

Islam unites society, making the Muslims stronger in bond with each other. The unity of Muslims is necessary for the efficient functioning of the Islamic State of Pakistan. When some people misinterpret Islam for their vested interests, then disunity grips the country and the Muslim society that lives in it. The Muslims who make this society does not function in coordination and chaos in the country. Wrong and misleading reading of the Quran and Islamic jurisprudence destroys

social values and the very basis of the Islamic society on which Pakistan is founded.

In Pakistani society in general and in particular, in Pashtun tribal society, the tribal mentality, local customs, and religious elites define minimal opportunities for women. Thus, in Pashtun society, the activities of the development programs/NGOs of promoting women's rights, women empowerment, including freedom of movement, freedom of expression, and taking part in economic as well jobs side by side with men are not acceptable to those clerics, who have limited visions and limited worldview of the interpretations of Islamic teachings instead of having actual and contextual interpretation.

One of the interview respondents, who was a moderate religious scholar, said,

Most clerics often miss the contextual interpretation of the religious tenets. Besides, they misinterpret scientific things according to their normative understanding. For example, Polio and family planning are considered the Western Agenda against Muslims, especially the Pashtuns. They often propagate that Pashtuns are the brave nation and the West wants to stop their population because the Pashtuns are the only nation who can fight against the infidels, the West. The local clerics' statements in weekly sermons that the polio vaccination has substances inside, which stop further conception in the new generation. Thus, the new generation to whom polio drops are given is more vulgar and westernized today (**Interview 17**).

During a field interview, a local clergy said:

They talk of women's freedom and women's free movement, which is against the teachings of Islam. For women, the only place is their home or grave, and no woman is allowed to go outside the home without having accompanied her legitimate heirs and relatives (*Muharram*). The NGO women sit in the office and freely move with men in identical vehicles. They

attend training and spend nights alone at high hotels in Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, and Peshawar (**Interview 8**).

During a field interview with a local cleric, he said:

Those NGOs talk of women's empowerment and women's freedom, and it is totally against religion and local culture. The religions forbid women to go out of the home while the NGOs try to bring them out. So, there is a contradiction in both Ngos' aims and the religio-cultural tenets and values. These NGOs are foreign-funded mainly by Christians and Jews, who want to erode our local Pashtun culture and religious values (**Interview 11**).

### **Theme – 5: Alternative Narratives, Conspiracy Theories, and Misinformation**

Generally, all over the world and in particular, in traditional closed tribal societies, like the Pashtun society of Pakistan, the people believe in the alternative narrative (in this paper used for "conspiracy theories", "misinformation", "false beliefs", or "rumours" in policy circles, academic research, and everyday speech. Alternative narratives run contrary to the normal narrative based on evidence (the term is interchangeable with conspiracy theories) that contest the common evidence-based narratives. There are various reasons why people believe such accounts, even without supporting evidence. However, little research has been done on this in Pakistan, especially concerning the Pashtun society of North-Western Pakistan, especially in the context of development programs and projects. Mostly, the influential local people (*Malaks* and clerics) can capitalize on misinformation and a lack of trust in development programs and projects for tactical advantage.

In their narratives and actions, the local clerics in Pashtun tribal areas demonstrate "'conspiracy' theory in their discourses and narratives. There is abundant literature that shows that religious authority still matters and influences politics generally in Pakistan. Particularly in Pashtun areas, where people have a mixed-up or blend



of both religio-cultural perspectives understanding and looking at things with doubt (87.9%) (**Table – 2**), mainly presented by the clerics as western agenda attacking their culture and religion. During FGD, an elderly person made all the participants laugh by telling that:

The polio vaccination has created in boys a tendency towards playing cricket, while in girls, it has created the tendency to get educated and go to school (**Interview 13**).

During the FGD, another person said,

Thus, polio vaccination and other development programs spread vulgarity in our local society through various means. NGO workers are agents of the west, and they are spreading vulgarity and modernism in our society by encouraging the females to join them by offering good salaries and transport facilities and often taking them on a visit to high hotels in Peshawar, Lahore, and Islamabad (**FGD 8**).

One of the respondents, who was an international NGO worker during a field interview, said:

Clerics and other influential people, *Malaks*, etc. in the tribal Pashtun areas have deprecated the Polio vaccination, family planning programs, and other development activities of the NGOs, thus calling these development programs a western conspiracy, western agents and claiming that these vaccination are causing infertility to restrict growing Muslim Population. The accident of the killing of Osama Bin Laden has further increased widespread misinformation about the vaccination. It has drastically eroded the trust of ordinary and educated people, thus has negatively impacted the national polio drive and trust in NGOs activities (**Interview 11**).

In one of the interviews, a respondent said:

Since the mobile phone has reached our society, it has eroded our strict values. Now the girls and boys free talk with each other, day and night. There are many

instances in which the girls have fled from their houses with their boyfriends. Even the mobile has destroyed the family system. We have witnessed many engaged girls who fled with their boyfriends, and the same is for married women also. The mobile is also an agenda of the West. The development workers are also agents of the West. They have taken an oath to promote their agenda. They are often converted to Christianity. Many people in the village do not go to attend the funeral of the NGO workers if he or she dies. During their funeral, people say they saw that these workers have some stamps on sensitive places of their bodies, buttock, which means that they are their agents and are converted. Thus, the people have boycotted the NGO workers socially and culturally, and they are not considered good people (Interview 2).

#### **Theme – 6: Worldview and Religious belief as a blik**

Blik refers to superstitions surrounding a person, where we find a lack of debate and tolerance for views of the other side (Hare, 1955). People often hold different views, attitudes, and of different orders on various matters. Even two or more people can view the same event differently and react differently to what they have seen. However, when the individuals partake in the shared religion as a belief system, these people are also easier to conform to a standard view of the world (Cobern, 1991).

Conspiracy theories often emerge as a blik because such theories are based on ill-founded assumptions about the veracity of the causes and motives behind a phenomenon (Douglas, 2017). The believers in conspiracies often desire to gain power and control to act on the elimination of the perceived conspiracies by limiting the agents and processes they perceive to be causing threats to the fabric of the society. When they fail in their quest for gaining power, or when they feel betrayed and hindered, they further entrench themselves in their

belief in the conspiracy, and the level of their grievance reaches the point of resorting to destructive and desperate measures.

One of the religious scholars, with the support of examples, clarified the conspiracy as a blik found in Pashtun society throughout history.

He said:

Historically speaking, in every society, especially in Pashtun society, the ordinary people believe and follow rumors, baseless news, and information without any evidence. They consider these conspiracy theories as religious bliks. When the aeroplane was invented, the people in Pashtun society believed and used to say that travelling in a plane is a sin and is unIslamic and those who fly in the plane are infidels because the plane flies in air overall sacred things and places, like mosques, tombs, etc. When the man climbed to the moon, the Pashtuns disbelieved this and said it was not true; no one could reach the moon and believe that this would make one infidel (*kafir*). When the tractor was invented, it was a common rumour that no one should cultivate the land with the tractor because it destroys the land, and it was also believed that by trashing wheat with a tractor, the animals do not eat the straw wheat. When electricity spread in Pashtun society, they considered it a government conspiracy to occupy their houses and independence. With introducing polio vaccination, the Pashtun believed that this is harmful and would eventually make the Pashtun infertile to reduce/stop their population. Recently, during the Covid-19 pandemic, the Pashtun did not allow them to admit their patients to hospitals because they believed that the doctors injected poison into the patient body and thus killed them. Now with the introduction of the Corona vaccine, people believe that the developed countries are installing a chip in our bodies and also

this vaccine will kill all people within two years  
**(Interview 10)**

The contradicting modern and traditional approaches have created an imbalance in the society of Pakistan. On the one hand, people are modern (scientific), and the other is traditional, held by clerics and uneducated people (Bryant et al., 2011). However, the middle is moderate, held by moderately educated and religious scholars, like Javid Ghamdi. The traditional worldview is primarily outdated and frozen in old traditional thinking locals looking at each thing with a religio-cultural perspective, held mainly by religious clerics and uneducated, common masses. Even everyday things, thoughts, ideas, and inventions are viewed through the prism of their religio-cultural worldview, thus looking at any new development with doubt and a threat to religion and culture. Every new development or invention is feared as a threat to the status quo. The traditional worldview has two implications. One is that the local clerics are not well-versed in modern education and scientific knowledge. Second, they think and look at new inventions or events with fear and a threat to religion and culture, thus challenging their authority.

One of the experts during the field interview said:

The traditional clerics look at modernized and moderate scholars competing for their authority within Pakistan as different institutions seek authority and relevance. So, the clerics fear these new forms of authority emerging. In the case of modern scientific things and medicine, like Polio, and family planning methods, the religious elites fear these political institutions, scientific and medical development institutions that offer alternative explanations for why things are the way they are. So there is a competition for authority in the region, a kind of vehicle for religious elites trying to preserve their power base in society. This might mean the overarching conceptual framework is more anti-secularism **(Interview 5)**.

It is interesting to come across an alternative interpretation of the blik where it acts as a lens through which the person affected starts to view the world and remains blind to the regular and accurate representation of reality. The entry into blik blinds the person to all other views and makes the person live in a perpetual dark alley, and at the same time, blik makes the person thoroughly convinced that God is on his side (Hare, 1955).

During an interview, a moderate religious scholar said:

The Muslim Worldview is how Muslims look at something while Islamic Worldview is how Islam teaches us to look at things (**Interview 15**).

Generally, Folk Muslims have termed those individuals who attend Islamic worship services, observe the five pillars of Islam, or read the Qur'an. Though these are very few, however, many Muslims (99%) remain fiercely loyal to the concept of being Muslim but not Orthodox Muslims (48%), that is, to follow 'Islam's lifestyle practices and religious obligations (**Table – 2**). Folk Muslims retain much of the content of their pre-Islamic traditional religions, and most of the folk Muslims are foremost influenced by traditional religion rather than orthodox Islam. Folk Islam constitutes a subset of folk religion, primarily ordinary people's religious beliefs (Hiebert, 1999). Folk religion and its followers are common in all religions. The majority of the followers of folk religion, even in Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, or Islam, follow religious rituals of superstition, belief in metaphysical things, etc., without having evidence or proof. Instead, they doubt scientific and logical things.

In Pashtun areas of North-West Pakistan, the people interpret and believe in religion as per their local perspective and culture (following folk Islam). Besides, the rise of religious extremism within Pakistan, especially in the Pashtun areas, threatens material things, especially development projects.

During an interview, a respondent said:

Before banning other secular things and activities, like T.V burning, ban on shaving, etc., the first target of the militants in Swat was the singing and dancing community of Banrr, Mingora, and the development programs and their workers in the Malakand Division (**Interview 13**).

### **Theme – 7: Countering Violent Extremism and Resilience**

The relationship between extremist ideas and the resulting violent conflict remains dynamic and flexible. However, subscription to and accepting the extremist narrative plays a pivotal role in transforming society (Brown & Silke, 2016). Countering or De-radicalization Awareness Network (2019) has developed a strategy to counter the extremist narrative.

To counter the extremist views, one has to enter the mindset of the extremists and then debunk their worldview and attitude to counter the narrative and violent extremism against the development projects. Entering the mindset of activists can open doors to understanding their worldview and entirely fitting oneself in their guise, considering oneself one among them to understand their inner thinking by having direct contact with them (Juergensmeyer, 2015).

An expert during the interview said:

Many observers, experts, and analysts assume that tenets of religious scripture and religious beliefs motivate and instigate activists to violence. Religious teachings, ideas, and beliefs are often considered the problem. However, many analysts and experts have proved that very few activists get motivation from religious beliefs and scriptures for their violent activities. Most of these activists are ignorant about their traditions' intellectual and textual aspects. These often talk about their particular group, their interests & defence of their community, and their faith in general (**Field Interview 19**).

An expert during the field interview explained,

The health service providers and the policymakers should try to probe the reasons and find the elements that instigate such misperceptions in the Pashtun community towards Polio vaccination and family planning services, etc. These misperceptions so far have led to violence, in which many polio vaccination and family planning workers have been attacked, injured, and lost lives. The health service providers should start training and advocacy programs to sensitise the community about the benefits of health and resilience-related development projects (**Interview 5**).

Another interviewee who was an international development program worker in Islamabad, a donor agency, said:

The development program should adopt a relational reasoning strategy to counter the community's misperceptions about their programs. This is a kind of give and takes of point of view dealing with them. The relationship between the community and the development program should be based on a relational basis of addressing the previous/existing misconception of the community and the reasonable solution and addressing their misperceptions of the development program about their programs to convince them. (Interview 13)

## **Conclusion**

This study explored how the Pashtuns of Northern Pakistan, bordering Afghanistan, look at the development programs and what are the factors and actors that instigate the Pashtuns against these programs. The study found that the development programs and their workers have been viewed as suspicious, and most Pashtuns negatively perceive development programs. Most of these suspicions against the development projects were: the promotion of western culture and vulgarity, violating and erasing local Pashtun cultural values, fear of religion and ethical values, and evangelist activities of the western

development organisations against Islam. Though the study asserts that even communities with negative perceptions of the development programs (NGOs) welcome infrastructure development, disaster relief, and the provision of social services like clean water, etc., these programs do not contradict the religious values and culture of the local community.

Furthermore, religious beliefs, alongside cultural factors, shape development policies and programs in complex and numerous ways. However, these factors are long ignored or treated gingerly, more often in the " problem" than the " solution" category. The World Faiths Development Dialogue (WFDD) set out fifteen years ago to better understand faith roles in international development to demystify and document widely diverse engagement. The first phase involved regional consultations that brought scholars, development professionals, religious leaders, and faith-inspired development practitioners from various countries. These consultations could present a picture of religious actors' development impact globally and identify critical issues arising at this understudied intersection. These regional consultations were deeply enriching, but they were necessarily rather sweeping. A central conclusion was that a robust and actionable appreciation of the faith dimensions of development must look to the country level, informed by the specifics of each situation, because context matters.



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Annexure –A: Primary Data Analysis

<b>Table - 1 Demographic information of participants (N=768)</b>		
<b>Demographic variables</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
<b>Age (years)</b>		
18–30	305	39.7
31–40	175	22.8
41–50	126	16.4
51–60	111	14.4
>60	51	6.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>768</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	290	38
Male	478	62
<b>Total</b>	<b>768</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Qualification</b>		
Nil	150	19.5
Primary	125	16.3
Secondary	218	28.3
Religious	148	19.2
Tertiary	127	16.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>768</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Employment</b>		
Unemployed	258	33.6
Paid-employed	242	31.5
Self-employed	268	34.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>768</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Income (Pakistani rupees)</b>		
<10000	362	47.1
>40000	335	43.6
10000–40000	71	9.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>768</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Residential Status</b>		
Rural	333	43.4
Urban	435	56.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>768</b>	<b>100</b>

<b>Marital status</b>		
Single	95	12.5
Married	673	87.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>768</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Geographical Division</b>		
Northern	384	50
Sothern	384	50
<b>Total</b>	<b>768</b>	<b>100</b>

Table – 2: Integrated Table of Data

<b>Question / Indicator</b>	<b>Response Rate</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Do n't know</b>	<b>Total</b>
1). The development project is nothing more than enslaving them, curbing and restricting their independence	Frequency	470	99	60	46	88	5	768
	Percent	<b>61.2</b>	<b>12.9</b>	<b>7.8</b>	<b>6.0</b>	<b>11.5</b>	<b>0.7</b>	<b>100</b>
2). NGOs are western agents, working	Frequency	539	34	21	81	88	5	768
	Percent	<b>70.2</b>	<b>4.4</b>	<b>2.7</b>	<b>10.5</b>	<b>11.5</b>	<b>0.7</b>	<b>100</b>

to distract people from their faith and are doubted as an evangelist and are funded by the West, mostly the Christians and Jews.								
3). Do you think that people follow their religious leaders and look at them when there is any socio-economic or political	Frequency	670	12	10	46	29	1	768
	Percent	87.2	1.6	1.3	6.0	3.8	0.1	100



event in the society								
4). Do you think the religious leaders provide explanations for every event or direct people what to do during weekly sermons	Frequency	580	87	10	46	44	1	768
	Percent	<b>75.5</b>	<b>11.3</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>6.0</b>	<b>5.7</b>	<b>0.1</b>	<b>100</b>
5). Do you think the common people fear NGO and do not engage in volunteer work if it is linked with any NGO.	Frequency	539	87	10	89	42	1	768
	Percent	<b>70.2</b>	<b>11.3</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>11.6</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>0.1</b>	<b>100</b>

6). The development sector workers nor development jobs are liked by the people	Frequency	622	51	20	23	42	10	768
	Percent	<b>81.0</b>	<b>6.6</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>5.5</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>100</b>
7). The clerics present any development issue as western agenda attacking on their culture and religion	Frequency	675	23	33	23	10	4	768
	Percent	<b>87.9</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>4.3</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>100</b>
8). Do you think development programs , IT revolution etc. modernization is	Frequency	697	20	34	10	3	4	768
	Percent	<b>91</b>	<b>2.6</b>	<b>4.4</b>	<b>1.3</b>	<b>0.4</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>100</b>

promoting western culture								
9). Are you Muslim and Like to obey Islamic Teachings?	Frequency	763	4	1	0	0	0	768
	Percent	<b>99.3</b>	<b>0.5</b>	<b>0.1</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>100</b>
10). Do you practically attend Islamic worship services, observe the five pillars of Islam, or read the Qur'an.	Frequency	369	49	2	269	77	2	768
	Percent	<b>48.0</b>	<b>6.4</b>	<b>0.3</b>	<b>35.0</b>	<b>10.0</b>	<b>0.3</b>	<b>100</b>