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**Role of Civil Society Institutions in Promoting Diversity and Pluralism in
Chitral District of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan**

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in

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Background and Context of the Study

Pakistan is a country with a fast growing population of nearly 190 million people divided into a large number of ethnic, cultural, linguistic, political and religious groups. The basic ideology behind the creation of Pakistan was Islam and it was considered to be the unique force which could bind together the religiously, ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse society.

An overwhelming majority of Pakistan's population is Muslim with Sunni and Shia as the two major schools of thoughts but there are many other smaller sects within the Muslim and non-Muslim population. Ethnically, Pakistani society is divided into major groups such as Punjabis, Sindhis, Pukhtuns, Balochis, Saraikis, Kashmiris, Hazaras, Shina and Baltis, and Chitralis etc. with numerous smaller ethnic groups. These ethnic groups have their distinct linguistic, historical, cultural and geographical identities. Whereas diversity has been considered as strength, in Pakistan the existence of various ethnic, cultural, political and religious groups has often resulted in violence and atrocities. About 56,475 people have been killed in terrorist incidents in Pakistan from 2003 to mid-February 2015¹. The root cause of all these deadly incidents is the growing intolerance and lack of acceptance of, and appreciation for, diversity.

However there are a few places in Pakistan, which despite the growing intolerance, fanaticism, and terrorism, have remained relatively calm and peaceful.

One such place is the District of Chitral situated in the north west of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) province of Pakistan. The district is bounded by Afghanistan on north, west and south-west, Dir and Swat on the south and south-east, and Gilgit-Baltistan on the north-east.

It is geographically the largest but one of the most remote and mountainous district in KPK. Spread over a total area of 14,850 square kilometres, Chitral is home to nearly half a million people. The Chitrali society is primarily heterogeneous, divided into different clans and tribes. Approximately 65% of Chitral population is Sunni Muslim and 32% Ismaili Muslims. Besides, there is a small population of "Kalash" people (non-Muslims with a polytheist religion) and some Christians. Over 14 languages and local dialects are used in Chitral besides the main language of 'Khowar'.

Despite its diverse population and growing militancy and violence in its neighbouring areas, Chitral has enjoyed relatively greater peace and stability as Cutherell (2011) also observes that there is remarkable level of interaction, cooperation, mutual respect and peaceful coexistence amongst the Chitral people despite differences in terms of ethnicity, culture, and religious beliefs. One of the major reasons for peace and development in the district is the presence and work of various international, national and local civil society institutions (CSIs). These institutions have been working in Chitral since the early 1980s in order to uplift the social and economic condition of people with the ultimate aim of developing a prosperous, peaceful and pluralistic society. The common experiences and empirical studies reveal that such interventions of these institutions have tremendously contributed to the socio-economic, educational, healthcare and cultural development of Chitral. However, how such interventions have contributed to promoting acceptance and appreciations for diversity and pluralism in the district of Chitral had been an unexplored but significant area. Therefore this study was conducted by the Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development

¹<http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/pakistan/database/casualties.htm>



(AKU-IED) Karachi in collaboration with the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan to find out how the large network of CSIs working in the region have contributed to the development of a pluralistic society which not only accepts and appreciates diversity but also uses it as a strength to achieve their development goals.

Research Method

In order to explore and thoroughly understand the role of civil society institutions (CSIs) in promoting appreciation for diversity and pluralism, it was important to use naturalistic research methods embedded in the qualitative research paradigm, which allowed to look into CSIs through the perspectives and experiences of people directly or indirectly involved in and those served by these institutions. Although some quantitative data was also collected through a checklist and questionnaire to get a sense of the nature and strengths of CSIs working in Chitral, the major data was generated through qualitative research methods including semi-structured interviews, focused-group discussions, observations of CSIs' activities, and document analysis. Research sample included the governance and leadership, management staff, professionals, and volunteers of CSIs; representatives from district and Tahsil administration, political and religious leaders, community organizations, social activists, and local people.

Findings of the Study

The findings of the study are captured under the following three main themes:

1. CSIs' contributions to socio-economic development of Chitral

There is a close link between socio-economic development and peace in a society as Murphy (2000) says, "...the poorer and more decaying the society, the more widespread and horrible the violence". Thus the CSIs in Chitral have contributed to:

- a. Improving infrastructure which is a key ingredient for sustainable development;
- b. Building economic capacity of local people;
- c. Developing social infrastructure by organizing communities into Village Organizations (men and women), Local Support Organizations, and other social structures;
- d. Increasing access to quality education;
- e. Empowering women & local communities;
- f. Creating job opportunities and income generating activities.

2. CSIs' Contributions to Promoting Peace and Pluralism in Chitral

- a. Establishment of community organizations at village, valley, union council, and district level;
- b. Conflict resolution through community mobilization and education;
- c. Awareness and education about diversity, peace and pluralism;
- d. Building local capacity for maximum utilization and effective management of their shared resources;
- e. Promotion of local culture and cultural



- f. products;
- f. Mobilization of local communities to safeguard their villages from intervention by extremist elements.

3. Factors Influencing CSIs' Work

- a. Self-Help and Community-based Approach to Education and Development has worked well;
- b. Investment in Social Capital / Human Resources has led to strong leadership and sustainability of development work;
- c. However, extreme poverty, illiteracy, religious and cultural barriers, power politics and keeping balance between donors demands and local needs have been some of the challenges for CSIs;
- d. Unequal distributions of development projects and employments amongst various communities, misuse of institutional resources, and lack of sensitivity towards cultural values have been some of the weaknesses of SCIs.

Recommendations

- 1. The more people from different backgrounds interact with each other, the better their understand of each others' values and point of views. Therefore CSIs may continue to further strengthen the community structures / organizations;
- 2. CSIs may work with education authorities to promote values and practices of celebrating diversity and

strengthening peace and pluralism in schools, colleges and universities. The may also invest in enriching curricular and co-curricular activities and training teachers about concepts of diversity and pluralism;

- 3. CSIs may revisit their development strategies and approaches to ensure all communities, regardless of their geographical, political, ethnic and religious affiliations, equally participate in and benefit from the development projects, job opportunities and other resources provided by donor agencies;
- 4. CSIs may further strengthen tri-partite partnerships (Government, NGOs/CSIs, and Local Communities) for sustainable development and peace in the region;
- 5. A comprehensive research study may be conducted to document and widely disseminate the best practices of various CSIs (local, national and international) for promoting peace and pluralism in Pakistan.

Conclusion

Appreciation for diversity and pluralism does not occur naturally in human society. It is a concept that needs to be taught, nurtured and made part of the values practiced in everyday life. CSIs are powerful force in promoting peace and pluralism in grassroots communities through educatin and development projects.