

LOCAL, INCLUSIVE AND EFFECTIVE?

A study of local peace structures supported by
Norwegian Church Aid in Afghanistan, Mali and Pakistan



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INTRODUCTION

Local-level peacebuilding has gained increased academic attention through the so-called 'local turn' in peacebuilding. The local turn developed as a reaction to international peacebuilding efforts focusing on 'liberal peace'. The latter entails an emphasis on democracy, good governance and market liberalisation, but has been criticised for being a "too centralised, too structural, too distant, too ideological and too mechanical approach to reconstruction and the building of peace".¹ The local turn hence calls for an increased focus on local-level peace efforts as a way to make peacebuilding more effective and more emancipatory by empowering local actors.²

For many international peacebuilding actors, particularly civil society organisations, the local turn has given new impetus to what we describe in this report as 'local peace structures' (LPS),³ a generic term for what are sometimes also known as local peace committees, community peace groups, peace councils or peace rings, to mention but a few. These groups are key providers of local-level justice and are of vital importance in people's lives in the Global South.⁴

Although LPS take different forms in different contexts, Odendaal and Olivier's (2008) description captures their main features: "committees or other structures formed at the level of a district, municipality, town or village with the aim to encourage and facilitate joint, inclusive peacemaking and peacebuilding processes within its context."⁵

The local turn in peacebuilding has been praised, revised and criticised.⁶ This report aims to contribute to three key themes in the debate around the local turn, through exploring and comparing approaches to working with LPS in Norwegian Church Aid (NCA)'s programmes in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Mali.

Firstly, this report addresses the discussion around power dynamics between local and international actors.⁷ It examines how far local peace efforts are truly built on local analysis, values and ways of working, or whether they are dominated by international actors' norms, approaches and ideas about effective peacebuilding. Secondly, and related to the above, this report deals with the question of local power dynamics. Several authors warn against romanticising the local and underline that local actors are neither inherently legitimate, nor one homogenous group.⁸ Thus, a key concern relates to who is empowered through providing support to LPS – primarily local elites or marginalised groups? Finally, researchers and practitioners alike have questioned whether local conflict dynamics can be meaningfully separated from national and international conflicts and, by implication, to what extent effective peacebuilding is indeed possible at the local level.⁹

This report is organised around those three themes. Throughout, the report highlights challenges practitioners might face when working with LPS and illustrates different possible solutions to such challenges. Finally, the report concludes by outlining some key questions which, based on the findings in this study, might be particularly relevant to include when monitoring the work of LPS.

1 Öjendal, J., Leonardsson, H. & Lundquist, M. (2017). *Local peacebuilding – challenges and opportunities*. Report 1027:05 to Expertgruppen for biståndsanalys (EBA), p. 17.

2 For an early contribution see Lederach, J.P. (1997). *Building peace: Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies*. Washington, DC: USIP. For more recent contributions see for example: Mac Ginty, R. & Richmond, O. P. (2013). The Local Turn in Peacebuilding: a critical agenda for peace, *Third World Quarterly*, 34:5, 763–783; Leonardsson, H. & Rudd, G. (2015). The 'local turn' in peacebuilding: a literature review of effective and emancipatory local peacebuilding, *Third World Quarterly*, 36(5): 825–839; Paffenholz, T. (2015). Unpacking the local turn in peacebuilding: a critical assessment towards an agenda for future research, *Third World Quarterly*, 36:5, 857–874.

3 Van Leeuwen, M., Nindorera, J., Kambale Nzweve, J.-L. & Corbijn, C. (2019). The 'local turn' and notions of conflict and peacebuilding – Reflections on local peace committees in Burundi and eastern DR Congo, *Peacebuilding*. DOI: 10.1080/21647259.2019.1633760

4 Fabra-Mata, J. & Driscoll, B. (2011). *Informal Actors and Institutions in Governance: Know the Rules, Engage the Actors*. Literature review and framework for analysis. UNDP (Unpublished). For an example from Afghanistan, see: Rassul, K. (2013). *Local Conflict Management. An Analysis of Local Conflict Management Approaches in Baghlan, Balkh, Helmand, and Nangarhar*. UNDP. Afghanistan Sub-National Governance Study Paper no. 5.

5 Odendaal, A., & Olivier, R. (2008). Local Peace Committees: some reflections and lessons learned. *Academy for Educational Development*, Kathmandu, Nepal, p. 3.

6 Van Leeuwen et al. (2019); Leonardsson & Rudd (2015); Paffenholz, T. (2015).

7 See, for example: Paffenholz, T. (2015); Richmond, O.P. (2015) The dilemmas of a hybrid peace: Negative or positive, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 50:1, 50–68. For a context-specific example, see: Hauge, W., Doucet, R. & Gilles, A. (2015) Building peace from below—the potential of local models of conflict prevention in Haiti, *Conflict, Security & Development*, 15:3, 259–282.

8 Van Leeuwen et al. (2019); Paffenholz, T. (2015).

9 See for example: Hauge et al. (2015); Van Leeuwen et al. (2019); Paffenholz, T. (2015). For a more practitioner-oriented resource, see: CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (2016). *Reflecting on Peace Practice (RPP) Basics. A Resource Manual*. Cambridge, MA.

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

NCA is an ecumenical organisation for global justice, working to support people in need regardless of their creed, race, and political or religious affiliation. For decades NCA has supported peacebuilding efforts in different contexts, working with well-recognised national and community-based civil society organisations, with a particular emphasis on faith-based actors.¹⁰

Supporting LPS at community level has recently become an increasingly important part of our peacebuilding work. We identified a need to systematise our experience in this field in order to facilitate learning, reflection and further development of our support to such structures. As a result, we designed a study focusing not only on the impact and results of LPS' efforts, but also on exploring how LPS work, LPS members' own understanding of key questions related to their role, and on different models of supporting LPS.

Study design and data collection tools

Based on programming experience and reading of selected academic and practitioner literature on LPS, the research aimed to address two overall questions:

- 1) What are the different models of LPS supported by NCA?
- 2) What are the results of the different LPS studied?

NCA global and country teams subsequently prepared data gathering tools. These comprised a focus group discussion guide for LPS members, a key informant interviews guide and a questionnaire for NCA country office staff and our local partners. Secondary data sources were mapped out and reviewed during this process.

Data collection and analysis

In Afghanistan, an external local researcher collected data and facilitated 18 focus group discussions with LPS members in 12 different rural locations in Faryab province in November 2017.¹¹ The focus groups had five participants on average. Nine groups had only male participants and nine only female participants. In addition, 2-3 key informant interviews were organised in three locations.

In Pakistan, an external local researcher gathered data through seven focus group discussions in seven different urban and rural locations in Lahore, Faisalabad and Umerkot in November 2017. Each focus group consisted of male and female LPS members, with an average 11 participants, 39% of whom were women. In addition, for each focus group, a separate session was organised for just the female participants, covering six additional questions, primarily focusing on women's participation and influence in the LPS. In three locations key informant interviews with 3-4 local stakeholders were also conducted.

NCA coded the data from focus group discussions in Afghanistan and Pakistan using 14 main themes and several sub-themes. In addition to this data, personal reflections from the focus group facilitator and questionnaire responses from NCA partners and programme staff were collected in both countries. This data was not coded but was used together with the key informant interviews to support the interpretation of findings from focus group discussions.

Key elements from the concept note for the LPS study informed the terms of reference of a planned external evaluation of NCA's peacebuilding work in Mali. Relevant findings from the 2017-18 evaluation are included in this report.¹²

10 On NCA's role in the peace processes in Mali and Guatemala in the 1990s, see: Adekanye, B./PRIO (1997). *Norwegian Church Aid's Humanitarian and Peace-making Work in Mali*. Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: Evaluation report 6.97; Tønnessen, A.V. (2007). *Kirkens Nødhjelp. Bistand, tro og politikk*. Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag AS. Information about NCA's more recent peacebuilding work can be found in NCA's annual reports from 2011-2018, available at: <https://www.kirkensnodhjelp.no/en/about-nca/publications/global-results-report/>

11 In Afghanistan, NCA has supported LPS in three provinces. The focus of this primary data collection was on the Faryab province only as similar data and internal studies had been carried out in one other province (Daikundi) and insecurity hampered fieldwork in the third (Uruzgan). NCA supports LPS at both community and district level. Eight of the focus groups were with district-level LPS but in the analysis very few differences between community- and district-level LPS were apparent.

12 Drawn from the final report of the evaluation: Van Brabant, K., Haidara, L.M. & Sylla, I. (2018). *Evaluation du programme de consolidation de paix de l'AEN Mali*.

In addition, this report builds on a desk review of NCA's own monitoring data and external evaluations, and reviews of NCA programmes in Pakistan and Afghanistan. It has also benefited from virtual and in-person practitioners' discussions within NCA's peacebuilding community of practice.¹³ While data from the various sources for all three country contexts have been taken into account in this report, the focus group discussions with LPS members in Afghanistan and Pakistan form the main basis of the analysis. This is where we have the most direct data, and where LPS members' own voices come to the fore.¹⁴

Limitations

While the study provides an interesting glimpse into the participating LPS members' self-understanding, the study is not representative of LPS in general, nor of NCA-supported LPS in the specific contexts. The main challenge faced by the research team relates to the broad scope of the study and cases compared to the limited time and resources available for collecting and analysing data. For some issues the study therefore mainly highlighted topics that need to be explored further. In this report we focus on the areas where there is enough data to go into some depth on key questions.

13 2018 NCA Community of Practice gathering. Nairobi, 24–28 September 2018.

14 The selected quotations from focus group discussions included in this report have been translated and then slightly edited for length and clarity, while taking care to reflect participants' views accurately.



Photo: Itous ag Bacrene / NCA Mali

LOCAL PEACE STRUCTURES' ORIGIN, APPROACH AND METHODS

NCA has been engaged in peacebuilding in Mali since the 1990s, and in Pakistan and Afghanistan since the late 2000s. In all three countries, the LPS we support are part of a larger NCA peacebuilding programme, which is embedded in a broader country programme.

With a few exceptions, NCA and our partner organisations were instrumental in triggering LPS in Afghanistan, Mali and Pakistan. How LPS members are selected varies between and within contexts, but usually involves some form of community election, based on criteria aiming to ensure a balanced participation of women and young people and the social groups present in the specific context. In the case of Afghanistan, NCA and our partner organisations aimed to strengthen or complement pre-existing, government-established community development councils introduced as part of the National Solidarity Programme in the early 2000s and reinforced under the 2016 Citizens' Charter. In general, NCA seeks to build upon local traditions for conflict prevention and resolution, but we and our partners also engage LPS in different forms of training and accompaniment in areas such as understanding conflict and peace, conflict prevention and resolution methods and human rights.

Key findings

1. LPS focus groups refer to using a wide range of methods. In Pakistan, awareness-raising, advocacy and persuasion appear to be the most frequently used methods. In Afghanistan, LPS report using a mixture of mediation, arbitration, negotiation and persuasion. In Mali, the evaluation refers to LPS using mediation and dialogue in combination with other approaches.
2. Overall, the conflict resolution examples LPS members provide suggest that persuasion by referring to social or religious norms is a more frequently used tactic than indicated by their answers to a direct question about their methods. The Afghanistan data provides several examples of a mismatch between the methods LPS say they use and what they describe doing. In the Pakistan data it is often unclear what LPS do, in more concrete terms, to resolve specific interpersonal conflicts.

"We encourage them, mentioning that Islam does not like hatred and we should not lose kindness from our society. This preaching and advise ... softens their hearts, then we make the final decision with the help of the conflicting sides and they agree with the decision."

Participant in a male-only LPS focus group discussion, Afghanistan

3. When asked about the origin of their methods, in Afghanistan around half of LPS responding refer to training by a partner organisation or another NGO, while the other half

refer to a mix of training and local traditions, with women LPS members more often pointing to training. In Pakistan, on the other hand, all LPS refer to training provided by NCA partners. LPS members in both Afghanistan and Pakistan report satisfaction with the training provided, and female members in particular express a wish for further training. This reflects the findings in an external evaluation of NCA's peacebuilding work in Afghanistan, which concluded that LPS members adopted techniques learned during this training.¹⁵

"Conflict resolution was a custom and tradition of our fathers ... Our people were involved in conflict resolution for a long time. When SDO [NCA partner, Sanayee Development Organization] came here we learned new things from them. We use a mix of both methods."

Participant in a male-only LPS focus group discussion, Afghanistan

"We want to receive more training and also increase our members, as now we are four [members]."

Participant in a female-only LPS focus group discussion, Afghanistan

4. The evaluation of NCA's peacebuilding programme in Mali does not draw conclusions on the quality of our training and support. However, it underlines the challenges related to training adult people with little or no literacy. It also points to some LPS questioning the capacity and high turnover of local partner facilitators, who are supposed to provide them with continuous follow-up. Furthermore, the evaluation team questions whether the methods used by LPS are more rooted in training than pre-existing local traditions and methods but comes to no firm conclusion.¹⁶
5. In terms of what values underpin LPS' work, members of all but one LPS in Afghanistan refer to Islam, actively using conflict parties' shared religion as a tool in their work. In Pakistan, LPS members either refer to values shared by all religions or to values related to social cohesion, making frequent use of words like "brotherhood", "peace" and "love" but not linking them to religion.

"When something happens, we start with small meetings of our LPS with people for fact gathering. [We] then use humanity or human rights to resolve the issue instead of using religious factors."

Participant in an LPS focus group discussion, Pakistan

6. When asked about which factors determine LPS' success in conflict transformation, LPS in Pakistan primarily point

15 Zupanci, M. (2016). *Building Resilient Communities for Sustainable Development and Peace: An Evaluation*. P.29

16 Van Brabant et al. (2018), p. 22.

to being a team, but also to the methodology they use and having members of different religions. In Afghanistan data is more limited, but being a team is again a frequently cited success factor, while almost half of the LPS there also refer to being perceived as honest and uncorrupt. In addition, focus group discussions in both countries indicate that the social status of LPS members is important to their results. In Mali, the evaluation points to LPS' community acceptance being based on the members' respect in their communities; including different social groups in the LPS; taking a proactive approach; providing quick solutions at low cost; and the nature of LPS' approach – not imposing solutions, but rather seeking win-win agreements.¹⁷

"The LPS was established with a composition where Christians and Muslims were mandatory as participating members. Our results ... are because of this formation, where both religions are present."
Participant in an LPS focus group discussion, Pakistan

Analysis of the findings

The variations in how NCA-supported LPS work in Afghanistan, Mali and Pakistan are of course largely a result of differences in these contexts – in traditions, conflict dynamics, actors, issues, conflict phases, etc. However, our findings indicate that the strategic choices of NCA and our partners also have played a role in shaping these LPS variations. Comparing the findings from Afghanistan and Pakistan highlights both how NCA and our partners seem to influence how LPS work, and the limits to this influence. In Afghanistan, NCA's support for LPS builds on traditional peacebuilding customs and approaches but tries to make them more inclusive and participatory. These LPS systematically solve community and district-level conflicts.¹⁸ It is therefore not surprising that LPS members themselves refer to drawing upon existing traditions for conflict resolution. In Afghanistan there are strong traditions of elders, community and religious leaders being involved in conflict resolution, often through a form of arbitration where these leaders make a decision that the conflict parties are expected to accept.¹⁹ This can help explain why LPS in Afghanistan frequently describe using arbitration and persuasion in conflict resolution, although these methods are not part of the training that NCA and our partners provide. However, LPS also often refer to conducting mediation and negotiation, apparently using methods ranging from persuasion and arbitration to a more explicit breach with tradition where LPS do not persuade or impose solutions.

Religious leaders are frequently members of LPS in Afghanistan. LPS members consulted in focus groups refer extensively to their groups' active use of norms and values from Islam, with *preaching* often being an integral part of the conflict resolution process. Drawing upon the resource of a shared religion can be an effective conflict resolution strategy. However, referring to religion can also help to perpetuate dominant social norms, raising the question of what interpretation of religious norms are allowed to dominate LPS' work. The study does not provide a conclusive answer – in some cases LPS refer to Islamic values in order to promote human rights and social justice. In several cases it is un-

clear which norms are in play, and in a few cases LPS seem to be dominated by a conservative interpretation of Islam. From the examples provided by LPS, their conflict prevention efforts appear to represent a more explicit breach with tradition, as they actively advocate for changes to traditional practices that drive conflict. LPS' efforts to reduce dowry payments are a point in case.

In Pakistan, none of the LPS focus groups refer to existing local traditions or structures for conflict resolution.²⁰ However, LPS focus groups frequently refer to working on awareness-raising and advocacy. LPS in Pakistan were established by communities with support and mobilisation from NCA and our partners, as part of a programme on faith minorities' rights. The set-up, approach and methods applied should be viewed in this light: awareness-raising and advocacy are key in promoting the freedom of religion or belief and other human rights.

LPS in Pakistan also report focusing on building relations between religious groups and preventing interpersonal grassroots conflict from escalating into intergroup conflict along religious lines, and vice versa. In this context, the LPS members interviewed report a different role of religion and religious leaders in peacebuilding compared to LPS in Afghanistan. Religious leaders are not referred to as members of LPS,²¹ nor necessarily as allies, but rather described as targets of advocacy who eventually turn into allies. In contrast to their counterparts in Afghanistan, LPS focus group members in Pakistan have differing views on the role of religion in conflict prevention and resolution. While approximately half of the focus groups refer to focusing on values shared by all religions in their peace work, the other half refer to values related to social cohesion, making no reference to religion. During one focus group discussion there was a heated debate around the role of religion in conflict prevention and resolution, with some participants seeing shared religious values as an asset, while others wanting to avoid references to religion altogether.

While overall this study indicates that NCA and our partners *have* influenced how LPS work, the extent to which LPS members use new methods and approaches seems to vary both between and within countries. None of the LPS studied appear to exclusively use methods and approaches promoted by NCA and our partners, but rather actively adapt and adopt what makes sense in their context. What results is neither purely 'local' nor 'international', but a mixture that seems to give good results, according to LPS themselves and external evaluations of NCA's and our partners' work.²²

From an empowerment and emancipation perspective, a question remains about what norms are at play in this process of merging and adaptation, and who defines what traditions to keep and which to transform. While this study does not provide a clear answer to this question, it indicates that the strength of existing conflict resolution traditions, the context within which the LPS are established and the programmatic model used to support LPS each play a role. Including marginalised groups in LPS, like religious minorities in Pakistan, also seems to make a difference.

17 Ibid., p. 4.

18 Built on the response to the NCA and partners' questionnaire.

19 See, for example: USIP (2010). Dempsey, J. & Coburn, N. (2010). *Traditional Dispute Resolution and Stability in Afghanistan*. USIP Peacebrief no 10. Available at: <https://www.usip.org/publications/2010/02/traditional-dispute-resolution-and-stability-afghanistan>; Niederberger von Wyl, J. (2008). *Trainer's Manual in Mediation: A Practical Guide for Community-Level Skill-Building Trainings in Afghanistan*. CCA and DDE. Available at: <https://www.ziviler-friedensdienst.org/sites/ziviler-friedensdienst.org/files/anhang/publikation/zfd-trainers-manual-mediation-54474.pdf>

20 This could mean that such structures did not exist in the communities, or that the LPS came in addition to existing structures. At the same time, the presence or absence of traditional structures to build upon is arguably dependent on whether settlements are urban and rural.

21 According to NCA Pakistan and its partners, religious leaders are often members of LPS. But in this study, religious leaders were not referred to as LPS members, and were not part of the focus group discussions.

22 On Afghanistan, see: NCA (2016). *Building Resilient Communities for Sustainable Development and Peace: An Evaluation*. On Pakistan, see: AR-SHA Consultants (2017). *Final evaluation of Norwegian Church Aid's Project "Just and Sustainable Peace in Pakistan"*.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND INFLUENCE IN LOCAL PEACE STRUCTURES

Women's participation in peacebuilding sometimes involves contradictory norms, both at the local level and in the dynamics between international and local stakeholders. Many international actors, like NCA, work from a rights-based approach, emphasising women's rights and promoting the women, peace and security agenda. In some contexts, this approach contrasts with local customs underlining women's primary role in the home and family, which leave limited room for women's involvement in public affairs. However, these customs seldomly go uncontested by grassroots women activists, among others. This study provides insight into how LPS are often important arenas for women's participation in civic life, but also shows how women's influence in peacebuilding still faces several challenges.

Key findings

1. Women's involvement in NCA-supported LPS is significant and has grown overall. For example, in Pakistan, female membership in LPS increased from 26% to 46% in 2016–2018.
2. In general, women consulted in the study report satisfaction with their participation in LPS. In several cases, but far from always, women report having considerable influence or equal influence to men in LPS.

*"We have [an] equal role in all matters to male LPS members."
"We [women LPS members] don't feel that our influence is limited."*

"Male LPS members listen to us and respect us [women]... We don't have any hindrance."

Participants in three different female-only LPS focus group discussions, Pakistan

3. When looking at how LPS work in more detail, key gender-specific differences come to the fore. Women tend to work more with women, and men with men. Women primarily address domestic conflicts, whereas men more often engage with authority representatives and address intergroup conflicts. Female LPS members also report being more active in awareness-raising, particularly relating to gender-based violence (GBV). The restriction of female LPS members to certain type of conflicts does not preclude women's empowerment in peacebuilding, though. In Afghanistan, an external evaluation concluded that NCA's peacebuilding programme achieved notable mobilisation among women at the community level and respondents reported positive changes in perceptions of women's role in peacebuilding.²³ Furthermore, while the evidence comes from one country only (Afghanistan) and is weak, it is worth

noting one variable that seems to allow women to transcend boundaries to some extent: age. Older female LPS members report being able to participate in resolving conflict processes between men.²⁴

"Men resolve conflicts over inheritance [or] water and women resolve family conflicts and domestic violence."

Participant in a female-only LPS focus group discussion, Afghanistan

"When an elder woman with religious... knowledge goes to people's houses, not only females listen to her, but also males because... people respect her"

Participant in a female-only LPS focus group discussion, Afghanistan

4. There are important differences in these patterns both within and between countries. In Afghanistan there are separate LPS for women and men. While male LPS members are elected in community meetings, female members consulted in the focus group discussions report being selected by key male stakeholders. The discussions also indicate that women depend more on mobilising male stakeholders, particularly traditional and religious leaders, to engage effectively in conflict resolution, and that dominant social norms significantly limit women's participation. In Mali the evaluation points towards women's involvement in LPS being stronger in sedentary communities than nomadic ones, and in areas less influenced by a conservative interpretation of Islam. Women themselves also report lack of literacy and education, in addition to the weight of household chores as factors limiting their participation in LPS. In Pakistan, women in the focus groups tend to report no barriers to their involvement in LPS, although gendered differences are evident when LPS members describe how they work.
5. Working to increase women's participation in LPS is not a conflict-free domain. While open resistance is more evident in Mali, there are indications of resistance elsewhere.

"Women have no role to play in the prevention and management of conflicts. Besides, they will tell you themselves. They are there because [NCA peacebuilding] partners demand that. But during a whole meeting, they do not say a word. What is the use of their presence?"

Male LPS president, Mali

6. LPS focus group participants, particularly women, perceive increased women's participation to have positive effects on

23 Zupancic (2016), p.11

24 Ibid. P.12



Photo: Nimat Rawan / NCA Afghanistan

LPS' ability to intervene in conflicts successfully: LPS get access to more info, better access to female stakeholders and work on a broader range of conflicts, especially addressing issues of importance to women. This is particularly emphasised by LPS members in Pakistan.

"Women feel comfortable to talk to us regarding their issues, particularly regarding domestic violence issues. It is because of female LPS members that local women have someone to talk to regarding their issues."

Participant in a female-only LPS focus group discussion, Pakistan

7. The study indicates that a fair number of women LPS members are already in a position of power within the community. In Mali the evaluation indicates that female LPS members *"often are women who already have a certain social status and are respected and listened to"*.²⁵ In Pakistan and Afghanistan many female LPS members enjoy respect as a result of their age or profession, for instance social workers in Pakistan, and teachers and midwives in Afghanistan. However, more marginalised groups are often also included in LPS, like young women and housewives in Afghanistan and members of religious minorities in Pakistan. Young women form the majority of some women-only LPS in Afghanistan, which highlights a tension between inclusion and perceived effectiveness and sustainability. As indicated above, older women enjoy more respect from community members – and they are less likely to emigrate.

"I come from a big family, [which is] influential... Part of my paternal family held the chieftaincy for a while. I was chosen by the village to be an LPS member. I think I was chosen... because of my personality because [the group] needed credible women, but even more because of my family history, the privileged place of my family in the village."
Female LPS member, Mali

8. Early evidence suggests that as women's participation in LPS has increased, the number of GBV-related conflicts that LPS take on has also grown.²⁶ More specifically, in all three countries there are several examples of LPS intervening in conflicts between spouses but it is not always clear from the data how those conflicts are managed. Focus group discussions in Pakistan and Afghanistan frequently refer to managing conflicts related to intimate partner violence, early or forced marriage and girls' access to education. Groups in Afghanistan also mention disputes around women's right to inheritance and dowry-related conflicts.

9. In several focus group discussions in Pakistan and Afghanistan, female LPS members in particular report community-wide results from LPS' efforts. These include increases in girls' enrolment in school, reductions in domestic violence and early marriages and, in the case of Afghanistan, reduced dowry payments. LPS primarily link these results to their awareness-raising and local advocacy work.

"Most of the families were not allowing their daughters to go to school, but now most of the girls go to school [because of our awareness-raising]."

Participant in a female-only LPS focus group discussion, Afghanistan

²⁵ Van Brabant et al. (2018), p. 20.

²⁶ We define GBV-related conflicts as conflicts related to gendered power inequalities, gendered violence or denial of resources or services based on a person's gender.

Analysis of the findings

In the literature, several authors underline the potential of LPS for empowering marginalised groups, while others note the risk of traditional power actors and dynamics dominating within LPS, noting particularly the frequent lack of women in traditional conflict resolution structures.²⁷ This study supports both perspectives. Women do participate and seem to largely value and use their agency within LPS, but dominant social norms and cultural practices appear to be important factors in understanding how women's participation and influence in LPS varies between and within the countries studied. Other factors also seem to play a role in explaining this variance, as explained below. These include the training and support provided to LPS, requirements from NCA and our partners, and the origin of the LPS.

How NCA and our partners address women's participation in LPS varies. In all three countries, we train LPS on women's rights and the importance of women's participation in peacebuilding, and country office staff underline that cultural sensitivity is key to this training being effective. Likewise, a step-by-step approach is perceived as key. For example, in Afghanistan, NCA and our partners conduct dialogue sessions with key community stakeholders to mobilise their support for women's participation before establishing LPS. As part of these sessions, the facilitator presents examples of women's roles in peacebuilding from the time of Prophet Mohammed, and verses from the Koran and Hadiths encouraging both women and men to work for peace. If resistance to women's involvement in LPS is high, NCA and our partners sometimes start working only with male LPS, and reintroduce women's participation once community trust and confidence has been built.

In Pakistan and Mali, most LPS consist of both women and men.²⁸ In both contexts NCA has set clear requirements to our partners in terms of women's involvement in LPS, but this seems to have produced different results. While female LPS members in Pakistan express satisfaction with their group involvement, and several male LPS members express appreciation of women's contributions, in Mali the picture is more mixed and some actors express resistance to women's participation. While there are surely many reasons for this, it is worth noting that according to the evaluation, LPS in Mali often work closely with traditional leaders and frequently refer to using traditional values and approaches in their efforts. In Pakistan, as noted in the previous section, LPS members do not refer to being closely linked to traditional leaders in the same way, and none refer to using traditional methods for conflict resolution.

Various measures are being taken to address the resistance to women's participation in LPS in Mali. Female-only LPS have been tested in some areas and a fusion of literacy and peacebuilding training for women and youth has been introduced in NCA's larger peacebuilding programme to encourage their active involvement. Taking into account the importance of religious actors and norms, increasing women's religious literacy, as has been done in NCA Afghanistan's peacebuilding programme, is also being considered. However, given the variance in conflict dynamics, cultural and religious practices, etc within Mali, different locations will probably require different solutions. Finally, it is worth keeping in mind that resistance is sometimes a transitional phenomenon. Particularly in Pakistan, some female LPS members refer to initially experiencing resistance from family members, but that this turned to support when the family saw the value of their participation in LPS.

Summing up, while this study attests to LPS as arenas for empowering women, it also points towards challenges. The combined experience from Mali, Pakistan and Afghanistan suggests that while women's meaningful participation in LPS is indeed possible when LPS build strongly on existing conflict resolution traditions, more effort – and perhaps time – is needed for women's role in LPS to be meaningful in these cases. However, we should not underestimate the importance of actually bringing women into these arenas, which have traditionally been dominated by men.

One contribution to addressing the remaining challenges might be to better document if and how LPS change as a result of women's participation, without assuming that increasing women's involvement automatically leads LPS to take on more 'progressive' roles in conflicts relating to women's rights. This study indicates that increased women's involvement *has* contributed to changes in terms of how LPS work, the conflicts they address and their results. While these changes are very positive overall, in some cases it is not clear how far women's participation has contributed to a more rights-oriented approach in LPS' conflict resolution. In all three countries, understanding the nature of the changes is an important basis for developing further measures to promote women's meaningful involvement in LPS.

27 Please see Leonardson & Rudd (2015) for a review.

28 In both countries, due to cultural restrictions, there are separate LPS for women and men in some locations.

LOCAL PEACE STRUCTURES' CONTRIBUTIONS TO CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

Early contributions in the literature on LPS claim that LPS should not be expected to address root causes of conflict, as these are often linked to higher-level political or economic structures beyond their sphere of influence.²⁹ In such cases, LPS might be expected to have a limited role in transforming conflicts by contributing to social justice and challenging the power of local elites. However, more recent contributions to the literature show that many LPS, though far from all, engage in any conflict they deem relevant and feasible to address, including conflicts linked to non-local factors, and those that touch upon local power dynamics.³⁰ Findings in our study support this recent contribution, despite variations in the extent to which LPS address root causes of conflicts and structural issues, and their links to peace efforts beyond the local level.

Key findings

1. In all three countries there are indications of LPS challenging the status quo simply through who they include: youth, women, and ethnic and religious minorities. This also seems to be a dynamic inclusiveness, changing as LPS mature and contexts change. In Mali, for example, including internally displaced people has become important since the crisis of 2012.
2. All LPS focus groups refer extensively to coordination with formal state structures – i.e. local, regional or national government departments as well as the police and the judiciary. The nature of this coordination varies, both within and between countries and along gender lines, as seen in the previous section. LPS in Afghanistan have a close collaboration with government structures, with signed memoranda of understanding covering mechanisms of mutual support and case referrals to each other. For example, in 2018 the Department of Justice of Daikundi province referred 42 cases to district-level LPS. In the focus group discussions in Pakistan, LPS members primarily cite coordination relating to LPS referring conflicts they consider out of their domain to formal structures, or to LPS approaching authorities to resolve conflicts – as a last resort or an active strategy. In Mali, NCA-supported LPS primarily operate in areas of Northern and Central Mali where formal state structures have a weak presence, and NCA and our partners focus on ensuring community participation in, and recognition of, LPS' work. More than 60% of the LPS are also recognised by a municipal decree, although the evaluation questions both

the formal and practical value of this.

"We do not refer conflicts to the government, but the government refers conflicts to us. If we are not able to resolve [a conflict] we write to the court or huqooq³¹... When people refer their conflict to the police or huqooq [those authorities] do not formalise the case. Firstly, they refer it to us and even sometimes the police call us."
Participant in a male-only LPS focus group discussion, Afghanistan

3. With the exception of cases relating to murder and theft, none of the LPS studied report much on types of conflicts they do *not* address. In Pakistan, although LPS were initiated as part of a programme addressing freedom of religion and human rights, all LPS focus groups refer to addressing forms of GBV in addition to intergroup conflicts along religious lines. Five groups also refer explicitly to resolving *all* types of conflicts. In Afghanistan all LPS focus groups report addressing interpersonal and intra-family conflicts, while members of five male LPS mention addressing intra- and intergroup conflicts. All but one focus group describe working with GBV-related conflicts, while 10 refer to natural resource conflicts, and three claim to address all types of conflict. In Mali, despite LPS being set up primarily to address natural resource conflicts, the evaluation lists a wide range of conflicts LPS have managed, including conflict between spouses or armed groups, and conflicts about land, natural resources or religious cohabitation.

"We are involved in resolving all kinds of issues, including social and religious issues."

Participant in an LPS focus group discussion, Pakistan

4. While some of the above-mentioned conflicts clearly touch upon the interests of local elites, LPS members participating in focus groups in Mali and Afghanistan are notably silent on other key conflict lines in their contexts. Two evaluations, however, shed some light on this. In Mali the evaluation explicitly points to LPS not involving themselves much in 'political' conflicts while in research in Afghanistan documented testimonies report LPS members challenging armed groups, indicating their ability to deal with higher-level conflicts – with some variations between different areas.³²
5. In terms of results, all but one of the LPS focus groups in Pakistan claim to be successful in resolving religious con-

29 Odendaal & Olivier (2008).

30 Van Leeuwen et al. (2019), Öjendal et al. (2017), but for a somewhat differing view see Paffenholz (2015).

31 The Huqooq Department and its offices are part of the Ministry of Justice. See, for example, Stanford and ALEP (2011). *An Introduction to the Law of Afghanistan*. 3rd ed.

32 Van Brabant et al. (2018); NCA (2016), p.8.

flicts and improving relations between religious groups, while around half of the LPS refer to helping secure a reduction in GBV. Data from the focus groups in Afghanistan is more limited, with a few indicating having a role in a general reduction of conflict. The same reduction in conflict at the community level has been documented in NCA programme monitoring reports and an external evaluation.³³ LPS members in focus groups also report a reduction in GBV. In Mali, the evaluation points to LPS being effective in managing land disputes and conflicts over the use of natural resources within its commune or between neighbouring communes. However, LPS are seen as less effective in managing power conflicts within their own communes and beyond, particularly those involving armed groups or traffickers.

“The issue was that a donkey of a Christian hit a Muslim and they started fighting... The incident caught fire and an Imam started giving it a religious tilt and they also stoned a church. This peace committee... immediately got Christian and Muslim local leaders together and settled the issue through negotiation. This could have been a big disaster.”

Key stakeholder interview, Pakistan

6. In Pakistan, all LPS focus groups indicated addressing conflicts with relevance beyond the local level and/or having some sort of link to higher-level structures, mostly at the district level and through partners, authorities or other civil society actors. In Afghanistan nine focus groups referred to a having link to district-level structures, one to provincial structures and one to national structures.

“Our struggles for peace at district level have a direct impact on peace at national level. For example, if a qaleen (dowry) is high it creates conflict – for a qaleen of 20,000 USD, for how long should a boy work to make that much money? We reduced it to 16,000 USD, then 10,000 USD and even some families give 6,000 USD. When we reduced it the level of conflict immediately became low.”

Participant in a male-only LPS focus group discussion, Afghanistan

“Religious conflicts are flamed from the top, including at district or provincial levels. However, local steps to promote harmony and brotherhood are essential... to address the root causes. When the lower layer... has learned to live together then higher or top-level spreading or igniting of conflicts will not impact the local level. That is what we are striving for.”

Participant in an LPS focus group, Pakistan

Analysis of the findings

The findings above point to LPS in Pakistan having a strong focus on intergroup conflicts along religious lines, which are indeed linked to national conflict dynamics. In interviews, some informants also perceive LPS to touch upon the interests of powerful actors. Given the importance of national intra- and inter-religious conflicts in Pakistan, and elements of structural discrimination, deep-rooted prejudice and hate speech from powerful national actors, what impact can local peace efforts have? LPS' own answer seems to be preventing interpersonal and local conflicts from feeding into national conflicts and vice versa. Indeed, some of the NCA-supported LPS were established by our partners in response to an outbreak of violence related to national dynamics. This was the case after the 2015 Lahore church bombings,³⁴ when four NCA partners resorted to inter-faith dialogue and establish-

ing LPS to reduce tensions and promote tolerance.

Rather than discussing to what extent local peace efforts can be effective when local and national conflicts are interlinked, a more relevant question is *how* local- and higher-level peacebuilding efforts can be meaningfully integrated. While LPS focus groups in Pakistan point to links with NCA partners and authorities beyond community level, in many cases this included little detail on the nature of these links. It is therefore difficult to assess the effectiveness of the links and how far LPS see themselves as having a role in influencing peacebuilding beyond the local level.

The LPS in Pakistan are part of a larger NCA peacebuilding programme that includes a range of national initiatives, including advocacy on faith minorities' rights and facilitating dialogue and collaboration between religious leaders. There are concrete examples illustrating how these connections have played out. However, the LPS members participating in this study do not specifically refer to this broader work and it is unclear whether they see themselves as part of a larger effort to address intra- and inter-religious conflict at the national level. Clarifying and communicating with LPS members about the links between local and national peacebuilding efforts might therefore be important. Studies from other contexts show how local peacebuilders often see the need to be part of broader advocacy and peacebuilding processes and how they underline the potential roles of external actors, like national and international civil society organisations, in supporting and facilitating such efforts.³⁵

Also in Afghanistan there is evidence that LPS engage in certain forms of advocacy, linking up with higher-level structures. Women from LPS at the district level have met with formal peace organisations like the High Peace Council, allowing them to convey women's grassroots views and concerns to formal and national-level peace structures.

However, in Afghanistan the LPS focus groups' reference to intergroup conflicts is more timid than in Pakistan.³⁶ Both in response to direct questions and in examples throughout the focus group discussions, GBV-related conflicts appear to dominate the work of LPS in Afghanistan. This does not necessarily mean that LPS' work is irrelevant to higher-level or structural conflicts. Some LPS see GBV-related conflicts as linked to wider conflict dynamics, particularly in relation to dowry payments, which in many areas tends to be very high and therefore is perceived to push young men to join armed groups in order to earn enough to get married. Furthermore, LPS' engagement with GBV-related conflicts makes their transformative potential apparent, such as in awareness-raising, advocacy, and concrete conflict resolution related to dowry payments, women's inheritance and girls' right to education.

Still, in Afghanistan, LPS' close links both to traditional leaders and formal structures might limit their transformative potential. Local traditions for conflict resolution in Afghanistan are largely dominated by a restorative approach to justice, with a strong focus on social cohesion. If they are too closely linked to both formal and informal power holders, LPS might risk focusing primarily on managing interpersonal conflicts to preserve local social cohesion, rather than addressing structural conflicts relating to social justice and higher-level conflict dynamics.

³³ Zupancic (2016).

³⁴ See, for example: BBC (15 March 2015). Deadly blasts hit Pakistan churches in Lahore. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-31894708>

³⁵ See: Van Leeuwen et al. (2019); Öjendal et al. (2017), p. 96.

³⁶ This can to some extent be explained by gender differences, as female LPS do not refer to engaging much in such conflicts. It might also be linked to the strong focus on gendered aspects of LPS in the study design.

CONCLUSION



Photo: NCA Afghanistan



By exploring and comparing the different approaches to working with LPS in NCA-supported programmes in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Mali, this report has contributed to the debate on three key questions related to the local turn in peacebuilding.

First, to what extent are local peace efforts truly built on local analysis, values and ways of working, rather than by international actors' norms, approaches and ideas about effective peacebuilding that are channelled through their funding and requirements to local actors? This report shows how NCA-supported LPS merge 'local' and 'international' values, methods and approaches to different degrees, and that local actors in some cases have differing views on the ideal balance. Variances in context within and between countries, the strength of existing conflict resolution traditions and structures, and the strategic and programmatic choices of NCA and our partners seem to influence the nature of this balance.

Secondly, who is empowered through support provided to LPS – primarily local elites or marginalised groups? This report does not provide clear-cut answers to this question. The study shows how NCA-supported LPS do include marginalised groups. It particularly documents the fact that many women find their participation in LPS meaningful and empowering, and how the involvement of religious minorities is perceived to be crucial to the success of NCA-supported LPS in Pakistan. But it also highlights examples of resistance to women's participation in LPS, and points towards this resistance being more pronounced when LPS are closely linked to local conflict resolution traditions and structures.

Thirdly, this report addresses the question of whether local conflict dynamics can be meaningfully separated from national and international conflicts, and by implication, to what extent effective peacebuilding is possible at the local level. LPS in Mali, Pakistan and Afghanistan navigate complicated settings with numerous formal and informal power holders and overlapping conflict lines, some that are primarily interpersonal or local in nature, others interwoven with district, provincial or national conflict dynamics. This report shows that several LPS engage in conflicts affecting power holders, tackle complex conflicts at the intersection between the local and higher levels and coordinate with actors beyond the local level. There is, nevertheless, a lack of clarity on the extent and quality of links between peace efforts at different levels.

Finally, while the nature of an LPS' context is of course key in shaping the way it works, this report also points towards the role played by NCA and our partners' programmatic choices – particularly in the balance between LPS' engagement in conflict prevention versus conflict resolution. While LPS in all three countries work on different types of conflicts and engage extensively in both conflict prevention and conflict resolution, their overall balance between more social justice-oriented conflict prevention and more social cohesion-oriented conflict resolution seems to differ. In Pakistan, for instance, supporting LPS within the framework of a programme on faith minorities' rights appears to have tilted the balance towards the LPS' involvement conflict prevention. In contrast, the focus on reforming traditional peacebuilding structures in Afghanistan seems to have contributed to LPS there having a stronger focus on conflict resolution.

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