

Role of Civil Society Institutions in Promoting Peace and Pluralism in the Rural, Mountainous Region of Pakistan

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Abstract : Introduction: Pakistan is a country with an ever-increasing population of largely diverse ethnic, cultural, religious and sectarian divisions. Whereas diversity is seen as a strength in many societies, in Pakistan, it has become a source of conflict and more a weakness than a strength due to lack of understanding and divisions based on ethnic, cultural, political, religious, and sectarian branding. However, amid conflicts and militancy across the country, the rural, mountainous communities in the Northern Areas of Pakistan enjoy not only peace and harmony but also a continuous process of social and economic transformation supported by strong civil society institutions. These community-based institutions have organized the rural, mountainous people of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds into village organizations, women organizations, and Local Support Organizations engaged in self-help development and peace building in the region. The Study and its Methodology: A qualitative study was conducted in one district of the Northern Pakistan to explore the contributions of the civil society institutions (CSIs) and community-based organizations to uplifting the educational and socio-economic conditions of the people with an ultimate aim of developing a thriving, peaceful and pluralistic society in this mountainous region. The study employed an eclectic set of tools, including interviews, focused group discussions, observations of CSIs' interventions, and analysis of documents, to generate rich data on the overall role and contributions of CSIs in promoting peace and pluralism in the region. Significance of the Study: Common experiences and empirical studies reveal that such interventions by CSIs have not only contributed to the socio-economic, educational, health and cultural development of these regions but these interventions have really transformed the rural, mountainous people into organized and forward looking communities. However, how such interventions have contributed to promoting pluralism and appreciation for diversity in these regions had been an unexplored but significant area. Therefore this qualitative research study funded by the Higher Education Commission of Pakistan was carried out by the Aga Khan University Institute for Educational Development to explore the role and contributions of CSIs in promoting peace and pluralism and appreciations for diversity in one district of Northern Pakistan which is home to people of different ethnic, religious, cultural and social backgrounds. Findings and Conclusions: The study has a comprehensive list of findings and conclusions covering various aspects of CSIs and their contributions to the transformation and peaceful co-existence of rural communities in the regions. However, this paper discusses only four major contributions of CSIs, namely enhancing economic capacity, community mobilization and organization, increasing access and quality of education, and building partnerships. It also discusses the factors influencing the role of CSIs, the issues, implications, and recommendations for CSIs, policy makers, donors and development agencies, and researchers. The paper concludes that by strengthening strong networks of CSIs and community based organizations, Pakistan will not only uplift its socio-economic attainments but it will also be able to address the critical challenges of terrorism, sectarianism, and other divisions and conflicts in its various regions.

Keywords : civil society, Pakistan, peace, rural

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