Inclusive local peacebuilding in Afghanistan

Lessons from practice

Jawed Nader and Fleur Roberts

Jawed Nader has been the Director of British & Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group since 2012. He has extensive experience in promoting civil society and good governance in Afghanistan. He worked as the Director of the Afghanistan Land Authority (2009-2011), and as Advocacy Manager with the Afghan Civil Society Forum (2002-2006). He is from Ghazni, Afghanistan and holds a postgraduate degree in Public Policy from the University of Bristol.

Fleur Roberts is a British & Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group trustee and has worked with civil society in Afghanistan since 2011. She has had a particular focus on working with local civil society to test and deliver locally led approaches to support sustainable development. She holds an MA in International Development from the University of Auckland.

ABSTRACT

How have local peacebuilding initiatives contributed to inclusive peace in Afghanistan?

Local peace councils have played essential roles in resolving disputes and supporting justice, working with traditional *jirgas* and *shuras* to fill gaps in the formal justice architecture. Religious actors' influence also has a key function to mediate local conflicts. Neither of these institutions should be idealised and both bring challenges, such as relating to representation, gender, conservatism and clientelism. But linking up with NGOs in joint peace initiatives has brought mutual benefits, for example in enhancing women's involvement, and has helped to multiply gains in preventing local violence.

A question remains over the implications for peace beyond the local level. Community-based mechanisms used effectively can help link local agency to formal peace structures and processes – for example local peace councils sharing conflict analysis and mitigation planning with provincial and high peace councils. As well as providing a significant practical resource, such initiatives would also help to ground the national peace architecture, which at present is widely perceived as remote and ineffective.

Graffiti in Kabul by Afghan activist group Art Lords, saying: *Tan-e maihan ba marham ehtiaj ast* – The country's wounds need a cure. © Najeebullah Azad

Many Afghan and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been engaging in peacebuilding initiatives in Afghanistan since the mid-1990s. A number of different approaches have been supported by NGOs and by civil society more widely to promote peace in response to multi-faceted and persistent drivers of conflict. This article draws on research by the British and Irish Agencies Afghanistan Group (BAAG) in 2017, which aimed to document examples of community and civil society-led peacebuilding initiatives. The research involved a desk study and 15 semi-structured interviews with employees of a number of international NGOs (INGOs) and Afghan NGOs (ANGOs) operating in Afghanistan.

Why look at the local level given the dominance and persistence of political conflict between armed opposition groups, namely the Taliban and Islamic State in Khorasan (ISK), and the Government of Afghanistan and its allies? The NGOs interviewed stressed that a conventional political settlement will not on its own secure long-term peace in Afghanistan. The country's deteriorating situation shows that existing top-down approaches are insufficient. Some feel there has been a disproportionate focus on macro-level measures, compared with limited support for Afghan grassroots to address local drivers of instability.

The causes and effects of insecurity in Afghanistan vary greatly and measures to address it need to be multi-faceted to respond to drivers of conflict at all levels. Local tensions and disputes break down social cohesion and can compound the authority of criminal and armed opposition groups. Equally, disenfranchisement and perceptions of unfairness in society – relating to governance, the justice system and socio-economic structures – can also drive support for the insurgency.

Mechanisms to facilitate peacebuilding at the grassroots range from broader development initiatives to more specific peace interventions such as peace education and awareness raising, supporting UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, engaging with religious scholars (*ulema*) and other leaders, and strengthening local dispute resolution mechanisms. Local initiatives occur across the country but are much less prevalent in areas that are too insecure. This article focuses primarily on efforts to enhance dispute resolution at the local level, in particular at two specific examples and how such initiatives relate to the broader armed conflict.

Local peace councils

Participants in the research noted that trust in formal justice mechanisms is poor. The majority of people, particularly in rural areas, more frequently refer to traditional and informal mechanisms such as *shuras* and *jirgas*, which consequently resolve a greater number of disputes than formal mechanisms – from local land disputes to small-scale armed conflicts.

But despite their prevalence and impact, respondents noted that community-based mechanisms are not without their challenges. They can be unrepresentative and influenced by ingrained and partisan power dynamics, resulting in decisions that sustain power imbalances disproportionately in favour of elites, and that disadvantage the most vulnerable and reinforce harmful practices such as *baad* – the custom of settlement or compensation whereby a

female from the guilty party's family is given to the victim's family as a servant or a bride. Also, *shuras* and *jirgas* often focus on community harmony, which is generally achieved by arriving at a settlement, and not necessarily on providing justice to the affected individuals. This can limit meaningful transformation of conflicts, allowing discontent to fester.

The NGOs interviewed indicated that while some organisations have worked to strengthen existing *shuras* and *jirgas*, many have focused on supporting the establishment of new, more inclusive community-based mechanisms. The most common approach has been to set up village- and district-level peace committees and councils (henceforth peace councils), and a number have been initiated across multiple provinces.

The inclusivity of the councils – ensuring representation of all facets of society – is prioritised to ensure more equitable outcomes. A multi-step consultation and selection process is usually undertaken with various groups within the community to scrutinise and cross-check information about prospective members. Extensive meetings are held between the NGO and the local community to agree on the best approach and composition. In some cases, involving *ulema* in the peace councils has helped to improve inclusivity, especially in terms of women's participation. For example, one Afghan NGO's work with *ulema* in nine communities in north-eastern Afghanistan has resulted in the *ulema* championing women's social participation. This has helped to convince other community leaders such as *maliks*, *khans*, landlords and other powerful figures to accept a greater role for women in local committees, which in turn has had a positive impact in ensuring greater gender justice in the councils' decisions.

Peace councils have been supported to analyse the drivers of conflicts that are impacting their community, and to work to address these underlying drivers and to play a mediation role. Examples of common disputes addressed include conflicts over resources or domestic disputes. Some of the peace councils have also attempted to help alleviate conflicts involving political parties, militias and major ethnic groups. Their existence has helped to improve community resilience in the wake of political tension resulting from elections or political processes elsewhere in the country or seasonal tensions between nomadic groups and settlers.

An external assessment was conducted by Thousand Plateaus Consultancy Services of one peace council project led by an INGO jointly with six ANGOs in eight districts across four regions of Afghanistan. The evaluation confirmed that the peace councils in question have been successful in preventing and resolving a number of community-based conflicts. As a result of the project, decreases in reported disputes were recorded as follows:

» water disputes – 29 per cent
» legal disputes – 19 per cent
» poverty and unemployment-related disputes – 27 per cent
» conflicts stemming from disputants' different religious beliefs and practices – 5 per cent
» conflicts over customs or traditional practices in target communities – 15 per cent.

The long-term sustainability of the peace councils is yet to be fully established. Moreover, attributing impact is complicated as their success in a given area depends on several factors including security, social cohesion within the particular community, the nature, size and history of disputes, and the community's attitudes towards traditional dispute resolution mechanisms. Equally, while the verdicts of the councils are non-binding, if the affected parties are limited in their capacity to access the formal justice sector – whether because of money, gender or geography – then there may be little recourse for appeal, as is the case with traditional *shuras* and *jirgas*.

Efforts have been made to give more weight to the traditional dispute resolution mechanisms by formalising them or improving their linkages with state institutions. For example, the Afghan government is considering the viability of bringing these mechanisms under the Community Development Councils (CDCs). However, the CDCs already have a range of responsibilities beyond their role of implementing rural development projects. Adding a dispute resolution function could potentially create tensions between CDCs' various roles, while such integration could also impact on the inclusive composition of the peace councils.

The NGOs interviewed stressed the value of considering the relative strength of the peace councils as informal independent bodies, and what might be lost if they are formalised. Nonetheless, viable options for linking the councils with the formal sector should be explored further as a way of providing them with on-going support and facilitating their role as key agents in the process of conflict transformation, providing they respect existing institutions' strengths and customs.

Working with religious actors

Religious leaders and scholars hold considerable influence over public opinion. Estimated at around about 170,000 individuals, religious leaders comprise graduates of religious schools and universities from both Sunni and

Shia jurisprudences – primarily men but also a few women. Unlike politicians, they are not elected and derive their authority from the study of Islam, operating as religio-political actors. Most hold conservative views and exert influence over social and political processes.

Nevertheless, peacebuilding projects that have acknowledged their role and have engaged them in projects from the outset have had some success in building support for more inclusive conflict resolution. For example, some cases have demonstrated that obtaining the support of religious leaders can create more space for women's social participation, but only if the leaders in question are open to this outcome and are approached in a way that raises their own awareness about the importance of women's rights and women's empowerment.

An example of an initiative that has achieved positive results for peacebuilding is one in which two INGOs and an ANGO work with religious leaders in all 34 provinces to help them contribute more effectively to sustainable peace. The initiative recognised that religious actors play a critical role in mediating local conflicts, and are often preferred over official judicial systems. However, as their work is mostly focused on preaching, teaching and advising on religious obligations, their conflict resolution potential is largely under-used and abilities underdeveloped.

The initiative set out to develop the skills of 414 religious actors, including 98 women, who were members of the nationwide Religious Actors for Peace network. The aim was to strengthen their reach and effectiveness in resolving family, community and provincial-level conflicts by providing training and mentoring in dispute resolution approaches. The initiative also linked these actors to national peace structures in order to capitalise on their potential to mediate and foster peace across the country, and to include their voice in national-level peace processes.

An external evaluation of the project found that a key strength was the support it gave to help religious actors work together to explore different interpretations of the Qur'an in relation to peacebuilding and conflict resolution. According to the evaluation, the methods used resulted in increased knowledge, capacity and motivation to mediate conflicts. They also positively changed the way in which the religious actors work in their communities by fostering participation and non-violent approaches that help to mediate, rather than perpetuate, root causes of local conflicts. Religious scholars were taught practical and conflict-sensitive ways of analysing disputes. These have made them more conscious of their own limitations as peace actors but have also given them more effective tools

to resolve disputes sustainably. In a few cases, the religious leaders successfully engaged in dialogue with local opposition groups.

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The initiative has empowered participants to be active peace agents. Successes were achieved by using an educational approach that was both experiential and participatory, which changed the way religious scholars interacted with people to resolve disputes. The evaluation found that while these methods were different from the religious actors' usual practice of taking authoritative decisions and making judgements on people's behalf, they helped to promote active learning, critical thinking, participation and ownership among participants.

The religious scholars reported that they changed their approach towards more inclusive processes in which they listened to people and sought their perspectives in the suggested solutions, which made their mediation more acceptable. The initiative also fostered a network among the different scholars, which according to the evaluation was critical in enabling them to access support and share ideas, challenges and learning. Meeting in person and regularly exchanging views, through phone and social media, created more harmony and openness among network members and helped to counter stereotypes about scholars of other jurisprudences.

These findings provide important lessons for other initiatives aiming to promote more inclusive conflict resolution approaches with religious actors. But there are associated risks. First, the risks to *ulema* need to be carefully assessed. While *ulema* enjoy high degrees of trust and respect among the Taliban and other armed actors, evidence has shown that armed opposition groups keep a close eye on *ulema* who speak against their political views and have, in some cases, threatened or assassinated them. Clearly, protection and Do No Harm principles need to be carefully factored into programme planning.

A key challenge for the initiative described above was that it was able to achieve the aim of linking the network of religious actors to official peace structures. The role of *ulema* in national and regional-level peace structures is

still ambiguous and there are varying views on what role, if any, they should have in peace processes.

Conclusion: implications for inclusivity

While assessments of local peace initiatives show positive results for conflict mediation and resolution at the local level, what, if any, are the implications for conflict and peace more broadly in Afghanistan? In many cases, there has not been a direct link between local initiatives and formal processes – although there are some examples of councils and religious actors engaging in dialogue with armed groups. So, what relevance do they have? It is the view of the authors, and many of those interviewed, that such initiatives *are* important in facilitating peace. Formal peace processes need to enable genuine participation from civil society, including religious actors and peace councils, which our research suggests is fundamental in supporting broader inclusivity.

There are multiple drivers of insecurity in Afghanistan, so the response needs to be a multi-faceted. Mechanisms that help to prevent violence – of any type – are important in creating stability. Strengthening community-based conflict mitigation and resolution mechanisms is an important approach in addressing localised drivers of conflict and is particularly important where formal rule of law and governance structures are weak or inaccessible.

Complementing this should be a range of approaches that help to build wider stability at the community level and beyond. For example, unemployment and lack of economic opportunities were cited in the research as key drivers to conflict at meso- and micro-levels. Peacebuilding projects that reduce poverty and improve livelihood prospects, and even bring warring communities together over joint economic endeavours, can be effective as they tackle this driver in a visible way.

If used effectively, community-based mechanisms can also provide pathways for community voices to feed into formal peace structures and processes. For example, community peace councils throughout the country have engaged in conflict analysis and mitigation planning with their communities. This adds up to a wealth of information that could inform analysis and planning of provincial and high peace councils. The research suggested that government peace structures are perceived as remote and ineffective, which undermines their legitimacy and capacity to deliver. While being careful to not undermine the factors that have made community peace mechanisms effective, much more consideration needs to be given to whether strengthening linkages between informal and formal peace and justice structures could help make the peace process more inclusive.

An inclusive peace process for Afghanistan must find ways to involve all affected groups, including the most marginalised. For example, Afghanistan's population involves a complex ethnic composition at the national level and a complex tribal composition at the local level. An inclusive peace process needs to accommodate both the ethnic and tribal dimensions of conflict. At the local level, NGOs have had success with adopting a conflict-sensitive approach, which tries to ensure that all relevant stakeholders in a community are consulted and involved, including in relation to tribal affiliation. Particularly in the case of peace councils, this approach has helped to minimise potential errors or omissions that might result in ostracising particular groups, especially the most vulnerable and least influential.

Inclusive peace efforts will also need to take into account the changing role of Afghan women in various sectors. At the local level, gender perceptions can be very varied and certain male leaders might find the way some NGOs approach gender intimidating or incompatible. The research found good examples of NGOs that have had success moving away from narrow interpretations of a gender approach. These have taken into account the needs of men and boys, and have worked with male leaders more subtly and implicitly on gender justice matters. Dialogue on inclusive peace at the macro level could draw lessons from local practice. While national and local peace processes operate on vastly different scales, local-level approaches have the potential to provide useful insights on inclusivity.

The importance of multi-track processes to building sustainable peace is widely recognised. But this recognition is not matched by concrete support. Political peace processes need to be broadened and much more attention needs to be paid to the contribution of communities. The powerful examples of peace practice presented here show how civil society initiatives have helped to strengthen conflict resolution mechanisms at the local level in Afghanistan. Tapping into this resource can enhance and harness local capacity to promote a more inclusive and sustainable peace process.