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ABSTRACT

Peacebuilding is as sensitive an issue as it is important. Societies that have suffered localized or national conflicts are prone to lingering underlying tensions. Conflict transformation theory highlights that these tensions can be transformed through strategic interventions, one of which is dialogue. Dialogues enable conflicting parties to address preconceived notions and work toward mutual understanding, making them a valuable tool for policy practitioners in conflict-prone areas. This paper examines grassroots peacebuilding efforts between Pakistani locals and Afghan refugees, focusing on the role of dialogue in changing perceptions. The study uses convenience sampling to survey 70 participants, with a control group of 20, assessing the impact of dialogues on intergroup relations. Findings indicate that dialogues have a positive effect on participants' perceptions and demonstrate a multiplier effect, influencing non-participants within the broader community. These results underscore the importance of dialogue in fostering sustainable peace between conflicting communities.

Keywords: Peacebuilding, Dialogue, Track III Dialogue, Afghanistan-Pakistan Bilateral Relations, Sustainable Peace.

JEL Classification Codes: D74, F51

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1. INTRODUCTION

Peacebuilding has largely remained focused on post war reconstruction. The narrow view has been under criticism and most academics now adopt a broader definition outlined by UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali. This definition takes a much more holistic approach and argues in favour of a series of actions to identify and support structures which solidify peace (Menon 2019). Barnett et al. (2007) argue that peacebuilding extends to include the process through which war can be avoided altogether. He argues that peacebuilding is not just the absence of war, it includes debate on elaborate investment towards fostering a peaceful environment; creating a new kind of ‘positive peace’, which can help in, ‘the elimination of the root causes of conflict so that actors no longer have the motive to use violence to settle their differences’ (Ibid., p. 36). Academics have gone several steps ahead and argued that conflict prevention and peacebuilding do not necessarily have to be looked at as separate. If peacebuilding is done right with well-placed investments, it removes the need for war in the first place. In this way, peacebuilding can play a crucial role in conflict prevention and can assist in rehabilitating people with openness towards each other (Ibid.).

An important aspect of peacebuilding is the conflict transformation process. ‘Conflict Transformation Theory’ states that through the use of proper mechanisms, destructive conflict can transition into relatively constructive ones. This transition involves debate on interpersonal relations and international mediation. The idea that this theoretical framework posits is that conflict can be transformed from violent physical forms to a more negotiable kind that can be had through discussions (Middlebury College n.d.). The theory affirms the shift in attitude towards peacebuilding which is highlighted by numerous academics in the discipline.

Dialogues are an important part of conflict transformation in the peacebuilding process. This is highlighted in the work ‘Peace Building through Dialogue’ (Stearns 2018, pp. 6-15). In this volume, Hicks’s chapter in the same volume emphasises the importance of meaningful dialogue in conflict resolution. She argues that the advancement in different sciences have allowed humans to redesign their approach towards conflict resolution. She argues, ‘What this new knowledge has revealed is that we can no longer ignore the human dimension of conflict.’ Furthermore, ‘Resolving conflict, including post conflict healing and reconciliation, does not happen without opportunities for dialogue’ (Hicks 2018, pp. 79-80). The point she intends to make is that communication is crucial in the peacebuilding process. Through engaging parties in meaningful dialogues, they can develop an

understanding of the ‘dignity’ of the other that has been harmed through this process. This allows for developing understanding on both sides and an opportunity for peace.

The next section reviews the literature and examines different frameworks that earlier academics used to study peacebuilding dialogues. It also explores how various countries successfully implemented peacebuilding exercises to create meaningful and sustainable peace. This section also analyses different perspectives on peacebuilding and how conflict can be transformed from violence to dialogue. After that the case study is given that measures the effectiveness of peacebuilding dialogues in Pakistan between Pakistani citizens and Afghan nationals. It provides the context, details the methodology employed, and reports the results obtained. As the results are presented, they are also discussed and analysed. These results fall into two categories: the first demonstrates the impact of peacebuilding activities on dialogue participants, while the second examines how these activities influence non-participating members.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Conflict, like other definitions in the social sciences, needs to be understood as a subjective concept. Ian Doucet, a renowned theorist argued that the term ‘conflict’ is ‘a very fluid, mobile, ambiguous word’ (1997). In different contexts, it can mean different things to different people. He showed how conflicts evolve and the different forces among individuals that lead them to like or dislike each other to the point of war. He found conflict to be a natural phenomenon, one that can be avoided and transformed. The parties involved in conflict resolution include the heads of states and other high-ranking officials. Lederach (2007) argues that for peacebuilding, the discussion and dialogues run much deeper and require careful treading which states might often overlook (Ramírez et al., 2024). They posit a much more senile image of the impact that such carefully worded discussion between parties can have. Their works outline a sensitive approach to building peace. Lederach argues about three possible tracks of dialogues, each of which engage different levels of population.

The discussion on the breakdown of dialogue to smaller levels has also been taken up by other academics. Macdonald (2003) also insists on taking the peacebuilding effort to multiple tracks. Diverging from Lederach, he argues through a different framework centred more on a practical approach. Instead of focusing on the different tracks of dialogue, he highlights the different approaches which are needed to be engaged:

1. Political peacebuilding
2. Social peacebuilding
3. Economic peacebuilding

These three types of peacebuilding highlight that there is a need to focus on different aspects of peacebuilding. Peacebuilding is not just the resolution of conflict among the head of conflicting parties since conflict travels vertically as well as horizontally. Thus, in order to achieve sustainable resolutions, populations of affected nations need to be engaged.

Kaye (2007) expands the debate by examining how sustainable peacebuilding is achieved through dialogue between opposing parties. She explores both formal diplomatic channels and informal Track II and Track III dialogues, with a particular focus on regional security discussions in South Asia. She emphasises the role of people-to-people communication in peacebuilding and finds that while Track II dialogues are valuable, they rarely influence broader societal or governmental policies. Through a survey of Track II participants, she observes a shared understanding that these dialogues have limited sustainable impact on state decision-making. However, she overlooks the fact that Track III dialogues are only possible where states are already open to such peacebuilding efforts.

Federer highlights the shift from narrow, discreet interactions to more inclusive and participatory processes involving civil society, reflecting a broader 'normative turn' in conflict resolution literature. He reviews literature from 1970 to 2020, showing that the inclusion of norms, particularly regarding inclusivity, have expanded the scope, participants, and objectives of Track II initiatives. His paper ultimately seeks to understand how these paradigm shifts have influenced the field and its future direction (Federer 2021).

Mitchell and Hancock (2014) discuss the conflict in Mindanao between the Moro, Catholics and the Lumad where peace was attempted through the semi-formal institutions established to enhance community conflict resolution ability. The determination of the impact of such informal structures remains allusive, however, such a push has an important role in establishing a 'culture of peace'. This highlights the process of building peace through the local agents allowing a greater number of people to become a part of the process ergo, a larger number of people invested in its survival.

Dialogues have shown to create meaningful peace. This is shown by Jarman (2016) in his case study of the Northern Ireland peace process. He showed that it was the willingness of the global community and ultimately the stakeholders in the conflict to engage in discussion with each other that allowed peace to flourish after about three decades of conflict.

Sustained dialogue harnesses its transformative potential, enabling long-term engagement to address deep-rooted societal issues. By shifting perceptions between opposing groups, dialogue creates space for conflict transformation and fosters pathways toward peace. Ungerleider (2019) demonstrates this by examining historical case studies where conflict

transformation could have mitigated large-scale violence. Their analysis of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Irish issue, among others, illustrates how structured engagement between conflicting parties might have led to less violent outcomes. Through these examples, they establish a correlation between conflict transformation and sustainable peacebuilding.

There is significant focus on peacebuilding through a bottom-up approach. Annan et al. (2021) argued that empowering Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) increased the likelihood of sustainable peace by fostering grassroots efforts. However, they noted that such peace could only be sustained if favourable conditions persisted and external pressures did not undermine stability, a challenge that Cameroon's CSOs faced. This analysis highlighted that peacebuilding was both crucial and highly sensitive. Properly structured discussions allowed participants to be vulnerable and express their perspectives openly. Rather than resolving issues through conflict, fostering mutual understanding enabled parties to be more receptive to each other's ideas.

Dialogues are a crucial component in transforming conflict into less violent forms. However, they were not entirely immune from violence. Despite this, they provide avenues for non-violent engagement, allowing parties to address mutual concerns in a more constructive manner.

This study aims to quantify the impact of such dialogues by examining their role in addressing tensions between Pakistani citizens and Afghan nationals. By surveying past dialogues, this research seeks to determine their effectiveness within Pakistan's context. The following sections will explore this analysis in further detail.

3. CASE STUDY: PEACEBUILDING BETWEEN PAKISTAN AND AFGHAN NATIONALS

3.1 An Overview of the Afghan Situation in Pakistan

Pakistan and Afghanistan share a long and complex history, shaped by historical migrations, invasions, and contemporary geopolitical events. Historically, Afghanistan served as a passage for invaders traveling to India, while in recent decades, both countries have been linked through the global fight against terrorism. Afghanistan, invaded by the Soviet Union in 1979, has yet to achieve lasting peace due to internal conflicts and the long-term consequences of foreign interventions, including the 2001 US invasion.

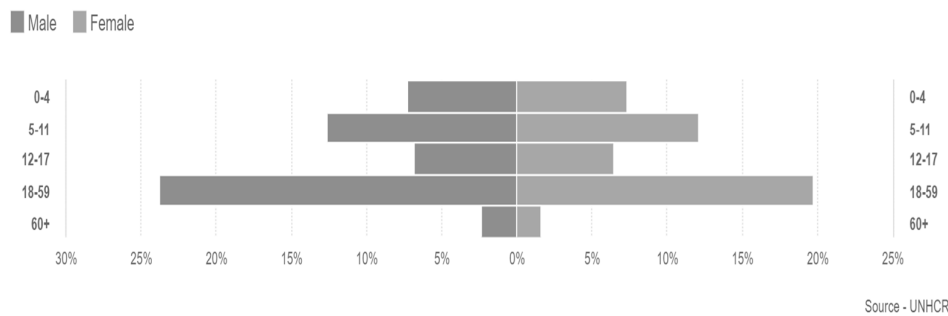
The impact of this political instability and foreign intervention has been twofold: it has not only perpetuated internal unrest but also triggered repeated waves of mass displacement. As a result, large numbers of Afghan refugees have sought safety in neighboring countries,

migrating northward to the Central Asian Republics, south to Iran, and most notably, eastward to Pakistan.

For over two decades, Afghan refugees have become deeply integrated into Pakistan’s social fabric. According to UNHCR (2024), approximately 1.4 million Afghan refugees currently reside in Pakistan, including 250,000 who arrived after the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul in 2021 (Ahmed 2022). The demographic breakdown of Afghan refugees indicates that the largest proportion falls within the 18-59 age group for both genders, suggesting a significant inflow of working-age adults with diverse skills and knowledge.

Figure 1: Demographic breakdown of Afghan Refugees in Pakistan

Afghan Refugees by Age-Gender



Source: UNCHR 2024.

State policies toward refugees have been a mix of both humanitarian gestures, such as providing shelter, and restrictive measures, including racial profiling by law enforcement and the persistent threat of expulsion. This dual approach has contributed to mixed emotions among Afghan refugees toward Pakistan. While some acknowledge Pakistan’s support, others resent the treatment they have received, leading to strained relations between the Afghan refugee community and the host country. Pakistan also highlights its role in Afghanistan’s political shifts, particularly in regime changes, claiming influence over key events. However, many Afghans hold Pakistan responsible for the conditions that forced them to flee in the first place. On the other hand, within Pakistan, Afghan refugees have been linked to rising crime rates, further fuelling public scepticism about their presence. Mulk et al. (2020) highlight this issue through a case study of resettlement colonies in Chakdara, where they examine the impact of Afghan refugee settlements on local communities.

Over time, as tensions have grown, the Pakistani government has become increasingly hesitant to accept Afghan refugees. During 2018-22, the government adopted a policy allowing refugee inflows from Afghanistan following the Taliban's takeover of Kabul in 2021. However, this policy faced strong criticism from the subsequent Cabinet, which deemed it unacceptable, citing the significant burden it placed on the state's social expenditure. In response to these concerns, the government launched a repatriation programme in 2023 to return Afghan refugees to their home country (Fahrney 2023).

Such large volumes of refugee influx into Pakistan poses numerous challenges to the local populace and the government structure. Among the many issues that the Afghans and Pakistan face, the most important (and relevant for this paper) is assimilation of such refugees into Pakistan. This assimilation extends beyond economic and political integration, encompassing social acceptance and cultural adaptation. The inability to integrate effectively has contributed to underlying tensions between refugees and host communities. One method to streamline the assimilation process that allows the social acceptance of the refugees into the society is through peacebuilding dialogues. It is the interest of this paper to investigate how effective such dialogues are. To achieve this, a survey was conducted, the findings of which will be analysed in the following section. This section examines how citizen-led peacebuilding initiatives can contribute to shifting perceptions and reducing social tensions. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How effective are peacebuilding dialogues in easing tensions within the Pak-Afghan context by shaping perceptions?
2. To what extent do these dialogues lead to a positive shift in the views of participants?
3. Can peacebuilding dialogues create a ripple effect, indirectly influencing non-participants through their interactions with those involved?

4. SURVEY DESIGN

To assess the impact of peacebuilding dialogues on regional stability, a survey was conducted among Afghan and Pakistani nationals. The survey aimed to measure how these dialogues shape attitudes and perceptions between the two communities.

The primary respondents were individuals who had participated in peacebuilding dialogues, allowing for an evaluation of their direct impact on participants. The survey also included individuals who had not participated in any dialogue sessions but had engaged with or been influenced by participants through discussions or shared experiences. The former group

helped determine the direct effects of participation, while the latter assisted in assessing the multiplier effect - the extent to which peacebuilding dialogues influence broader communities through indirect exposure. The multiplier effect refers to the broader impact that such dialogues may have on non-participants, shaping their perspectives through interactions with those who took part in these discussions

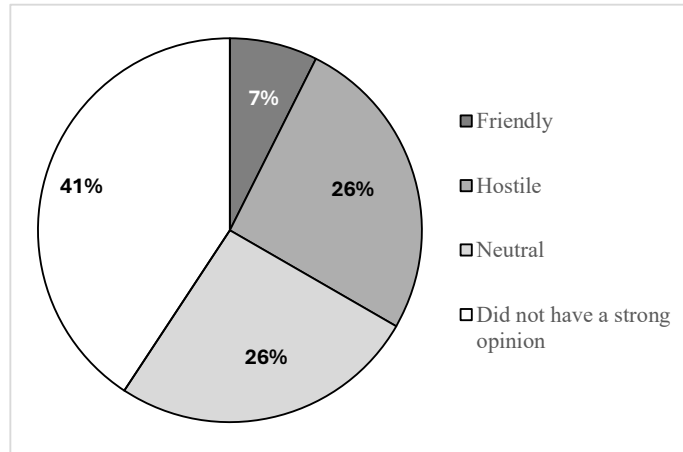
The survey was based on convenience sampling with a total sample size of 70 and a control group of 20 participants. The sample size was determined by the number of participants available and the specific context of the study. While larger samples can provide more statistically significant results, this sample was generated through liaison with Hanns Seidel Foundation Pakistan (HSF) which provided access to their pool of participants from the different formats of dialogues they conducted. In this way, although the sample was small, the results are much more dependable. The survey targeted Pakistani and Afghan students who were engaged in formal or informal dialogues. In this regard, HSF remained very useful for providing access to people from both nations. Students who did not participate in dialogues were also targeted to establish a control group. The sample size was made up of two thirds of Pakistani nationals while the rest were Afghan. This difference in the participant ratio was deliberate and meant to capture the actual demographics of the dialogue process being studied. Efforts were made to ensure that the analysis considered this imbalance, and care was taken in interpreting results.

5. FINDINGS

5.1 Determining the Effectiveness of Dialogues

This section will present the results of the survey conducted. The first question in this inquiry was to have the surveyed members undergo retrospection of the views they held before peacebuilding dialogues. The retrospection was facilitated by asking the participants to reflect on and self-assess their previous attitudes before engaging in any peacebuilding dialogues. This question was asked of both participants who had taken part in peacebuilding dialogues and those who had not. There is an inherent tendency of recall bias in all such questions, however the survey design (posing multiple questions to measure a single variable) allowed inconsistencies to be eliminated. The survey showed that before participation in peacebuilding dialogues 26% of the participants had a hostile view, 26% described themselves as neutral and a mere 7% perceived that relations between the two countries were friendly.

Figure 2: Perception before Participating in Peacebuilding Dialogues



Source: Data from author’s primary research.

To verify these figures, the results of the retrospection method were crossed with those from the control group.

Table 1: Verifying the Retrospection Method Against Control

Group	Control Group %	Experimental Group %	Difference %
Friendly	11	7.41	-3.70
Hostile	22.2	25.93	3.71
Neutral	27.78	25.93	-1.85
Did not have a strong opinion	38.89	40.74	1.85

Source: Data from author’s primary research.

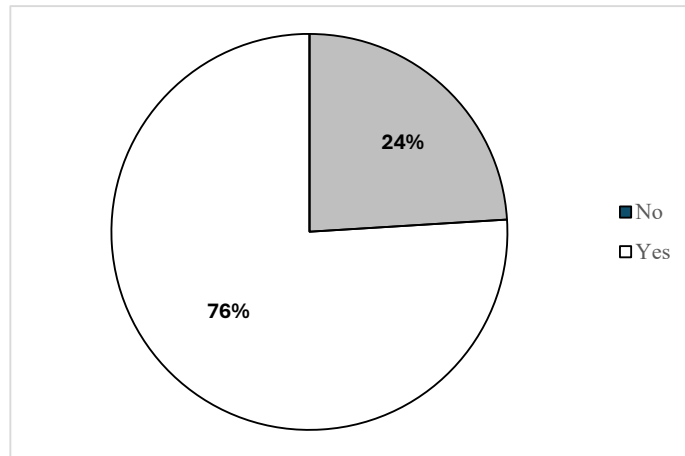
The results of the two groups were established to be comparable and through this verification method, the retrospective method was verified to have meaningful results.

This question provided an overview of the kind of audience that was being engaged and the general perception of both nations towards each other. This question helped in the construction of a rudimentary baseline through which it was possible to measure the impact peacebuilding dialogues could have.

It was, therefore, in the interest of this study to investigate the openness of both groups towards any form of peacebuilding dialogue. For this, the participants were inquired about their view on engaging with the other party on issues of a sensitive nature. Figure 3 show

that 76% respondents stated that matters that were deemed ‘sensitive’ should be talked about.

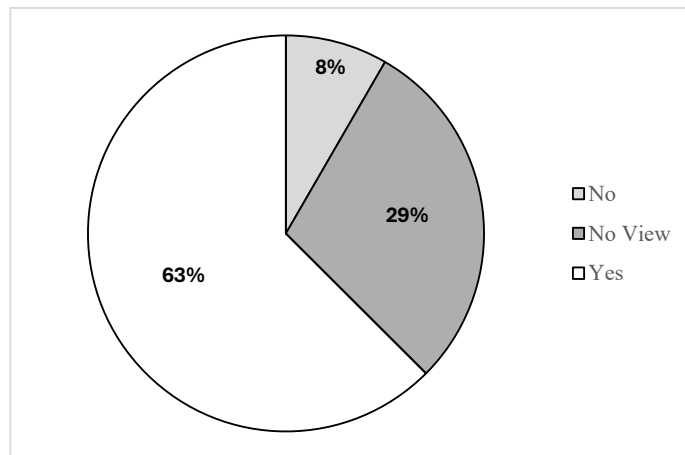
Figure 3: Should Sensitive Topics Be Talked About?



Source: Data from author’s primary research.

The next section of this inquiry targeted the determination of whether peacebuilding dialogues impacted the participants in any capacity. These questions also determined the kind of impact that such dialogues had (positive or negative). These questions were targeted towards people who had participated in dialogues.

Figure 4: Did Participating in Peacebuilding Dialogues Change Your Perception?



Source: Data from author’s primary research.

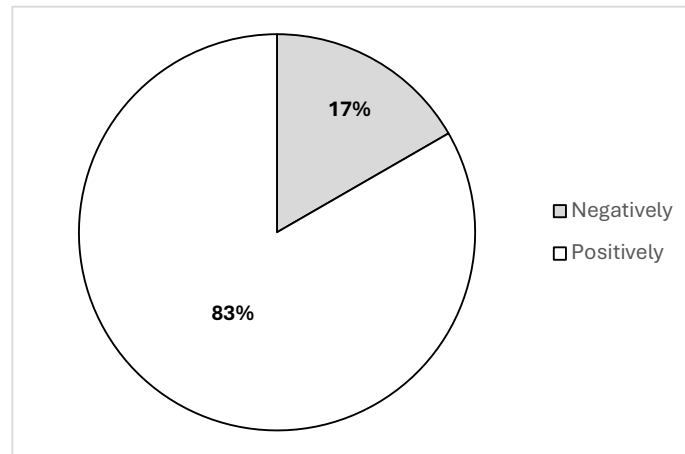
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The participants were asked if dialogues had any impact on their perception towards the other country. In response to this inquiry, 63% of the participants responded that they had changed their opinion about the matter after participating in the dialogue. This shift suggests that the Pak-Afghan dialogues were effective in challenging preconceived notions and fostering a more nuanced understanding of cross-border relations.

The 29% of participants who selected ‘no view’ indicated either indifference toward the dialogue or a lack of engagement with its structure, making it insufficiently impactful for them to consider any meaningful change.

This analysis revealed that, for the most part, dialogues contributed to shifting participants’ perceptions in a meaningful way. Participants were then asked to describe the nature of this change, whether the dialogue had created greater understanding and connection with people from the other nation (a positive shift) or if it had reinforced divisions and increased distance (a negative shift). A significant majority (83%) reported a positive change in perception as a result of their participation, highlighting the effectiveness of peacebuilding dialogues in improving mutual understanding. Conversely, 17% of participants indicated that their perceptions had further deteriorated, suggesting that while dialogue can be impactful, it may not always lead to reconciliation for all individuals.

Figure 5: How Did Participating in Peacebuilding Dialogues Impact Your Perception?



Source: Data from author’s primary research.

This section shows that, overall, the peacebuilding dialogues played an important role in positively changing perception of the parties towards each other. This data substantiates the claims that were established in the theoretical framework. It is important to note that the

impact of this dialogue may not be uniform across the participants and factors such as demographic differences and carrying levels of prior hostility and preconceived notion will likely contribute to a diverse outcome. A more segmented study could provide clearer and a more detailed image of the impact of such dialogues. While the study was limited in scope due to its small sample size, it highlights the potential of dialogues as a tool for peacebuilding and shows that they can have a meaningful impact.

5.2 Determining Multiplier Effect

This section demonstrates that, overall, peacebuilding dialogues played a significant role in fostering positive perception shifts between the participating groups. The findings support the claims established in the theoretical framework, reinforcing the idea that dialogue can be an effective tool for conflict transformation. However, it is important to recognise that the impact of these dialogues was not uniform across all participants. Factors such as demographic differences, varying levels of prior hostility, and pre-existing biases likely contributed to diverse individual experiences and outcomes. A more segmented study could offer a clearer and more detailed understanding of these variations. While this study was limited in scope due to its small sample size, it underscores the potential of dialogues as a valuable peacebuilding mechanism. The findings suggest that, despite certain limitations, structured engagement through dialogue can lead to meaningful shifts in perception and foster mutual understanding.

Table 2: Effect of Peacebuilding Dialogues: Comparison between Experiment and Control Groups

Group	Control Group %	Experiment Group %	Difference %
Yes	53.85	87.50	-34
No	46.15	12.50	34

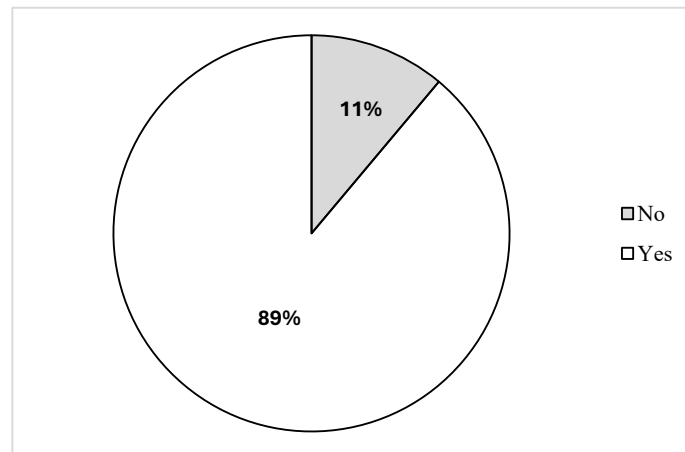
Source: Data from author’s primary research.

This disproportionate result suggests that dialogue participants may overreport their communication efforts. Another possible explanation is the large population size, which limits how many people each participant can actively engage with, even within their immediate social circles. Based on the data, if 87% of dialogue participants shared their changed perceptions with others, this would influence approximately 53.85% of non-participants. However, a larger sample size would be needed to validate this estimate more accurately.

A broader study incorporating demographic data could provide more precise fluctuations in these numbers. Nonetheless, this finding offers a valuable snapshot of the potential of Track III dialogues in spreading ideas and shaping societal narratives. It confirms that dialogues do, in fact, have a multiplier effect by extending their influence beyond direct participants.

Further questions posed to the control group aimed to assess whether conversations with dialogue participants influenced their perceptions of the other party. In response, 89% of non-participants reported that their views had changed as a result of these discussions. This finding reinforces the notion that dialogue-driven interactions contribute to shifting perspectives, even among those who did not directly participate in the peacebuilding process.

Figure 6: Has Talking to a Peacebuilding Dialogue Participant influenced Your Perception?



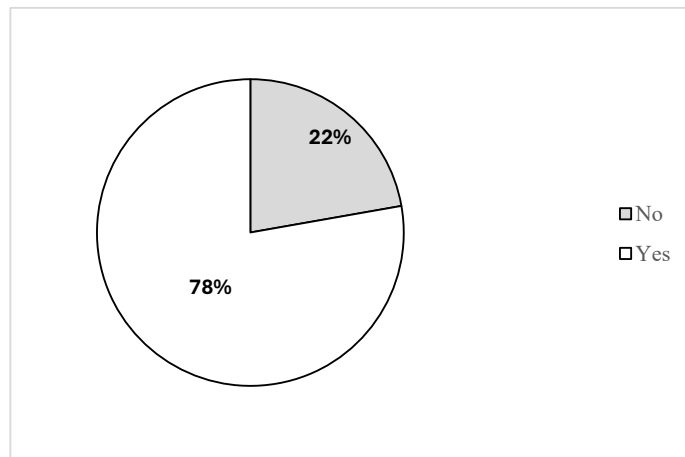
Source: Data from author's primary research.

5.3 Determining the Ripple Effect

The final exercise aimed to assess how indirect exposure to peacebuilding dialogues influenced individuals who had not participated directly. Participants were asked a series of questions to determine whether conversations with someone who had engaged in peacebuilding dialogues positively impacted their perception. Specifically, they were asked if discussions with a colleague or acquaintance who had participated in such dialogues led to a change in their views toward the other nation.

The results indicated that 78% of these individuals reported a positive shift in their opinions, reinforcing the idea that dialogue has a ripple effect, extending beyond direct participants to influence broader societal perceptions.

Figure 7: If You Have Not Participated in Peacebuilding Dialogues, Has Speaking with a Participant Positively Influenced Your Perception about these Discussions?



Source: Data from author’s primary research.

CONCLUSION

This study was able to establish the impact that dialogues can have on peacebuilding and that:

1. There was broad consensus on the importance of conducting peacebuilding dialogues on sensitive topics. However, from an academic perspective, these discussions must be carefully structured to prevent ‘rigidification’ of previously held beliefs.
2. Peacebuilding dialogues serve as powerful tools for challenging and reshaping preconceived notions, fostering greater understanding between opposing groups.
3. Engaging in peacebuilding dialogues positively influences participants’ perceptions of one another, reducing underlying tensions and building meaningful connections.
4. These dialogues extend beyond direct participants, creating a spillover effect—non-participants who engage in discussions with dialogue participants often experience a positive shift in perception as well.

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These findings underscore the need for a careful and multi-level approach to peacebuilding. While engagement with top-tier leadership is crucial, a bottom-up approach that extends the peace process to the broader population is equally important. Sustainable peace can only be achieved through meaningful exchanges of ideas and emotions, fostering mutual understanding at all levels of society.

Participants in peacebuilding dialogues reported a significant improvement in their understanding of each other's perspectives. This engagement helped them recognise that grief and suffering exist on both sides, developing empathy and reducing hostility. By sharing their experiences of pain, both groups formed deeper connections, becoming more receptive to each other's struggles. This aligns with Lederach's perspective, which points to the importance of humanising dialogue in conflict resolution.

Furthermore, Kaye's assertion that national level dialogue does not naturally filter down to the general population is supported by the baseline findings of this study. Initially, only 7% of participants held friendly perceptions toward the other group before engaging in dialogue. However, after participating in discussions, many individuals were able to establish connections on a personal level, leading to a significant shift in perception. These findings highlight the effectiveness of Track III dialogues in fostering grassroots understanding and reconciliation.

This study was limited in scope, and a larger sample size combined with a more detailed survey could provide deeper insights into the complexities of peacebuilding efforts. However, despite its limitations, the findings demonstrate, through a small but robust sample, that peacebuilding dialogues hold significant potential to foster positive perceptions between opposing groups in Pakistan's context.

Traditionally, post-conflict reconstruction has been viewed primarily as a political and economic endeavour. However, as shown in numerous reviewed works and this study's findings, this perspective requires re-evaluation. Despite Afghan nationals spending prolonged periods in Pakistan, the study reveals that without active engagement in structured dialogues, mutual understanding between the two communities remains limited. This underscores the importance of integrating dialogue initiatives into peacebuilding efforts to facilitate meaningful reconciliation and long-term cooperation. Future research should explore the success of peacebuilding efforts by examining the demographic variations in perception shifts. Structured experiments could be conducted by actively encouraging participants to initiate dialogues within their communities. This approach would allow for a more precise assessment of the multiplier effect, determining its effectiveness and potential societal reach. If such an approach proves successful, it could

pave the way for strategically designed peacebuilding dialogues with wider social impacts. The multiplier effect is particularly significant as it reduces the economic cost of peacebuilding initiatives, eliminating the need to engage every individual in direct dialogue while still fostering broad societal change. These findings are particularly relevant for Pakistan, as the country grapples with rising militancy along its western belt.

In conclusion, dialogues serve as powerful tools for conflict transformation. They bridge divides, foster understanding, and promote reconciliation between groups with historically negative perceptions of each other. Effective peacebuilding requires not only political and economic interventions but also social remedies, including structured dialogue initiatives that help communities heal and rebuild trust.

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