

Journal of Development Policy, Research & Practice

ISSN (P): [2522-3410](#)

ISSN (E): [2663-3698](#)



Volume 9, 2025

Article History

Submitted:
September 24, 2024
Last Revised:
July 14, 2025
Accepted:
August 12, 2025

Funding

No

Copyright

The Authors

Promoting Peace and Interfaith Harmony: Role of Rural Support Programmes in Tharparkar, Pakistan

Roomi S. Hayat¹

¹Chief Executive Officer, Institute of Rural Management (IRM), Islamabad, Pakistan

Correspondence:

Romi S. Hayat: roomi@irm.edu.pk

Article Link:

<https://journals.sdpi.org/index.php/JoDPRP/article/view/127>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59926/jodprp.vol09/03>

Citation:

Hayat, R. S. 2025. 'Promoting Peace and Interfaith Harmony: Role of Rural Support Programmes in Tharparkar, Pakistan', *Journal of Development Policy, Research & Practice*, vol. 9, pp. 40-58.

Conflict of Interest: Authors declared no Conflict of Interest

Funding Acknowledgement: No administrative and technical support was taken for this research.

Licensing:



Licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



Scan here to read



An official Publication of the
Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad,
Pakistan



Promoting Peace and Interfaith Harmony: Role of Rural Support Programmes in Tharparkar, Pakistan

*Roomi S. Hayat**

ABSTRACT

Fostering peaceful coexistence is crucial for societal cohesion in multifunctional communities. Over the last 30 years, Rural Support Programmes (RSPs) have made considerable progress in conflict resolution, reaching across various segments of society, and supporting social integration in Pakistan which has helped lower community conflict over time. This study focuses on the contribution of RSPs towards peacemaking and interfaith harmony. Using a mixed-methods approach, it specifically examines patterns of interreligious cohabitation and socio-cultural accommodation between Hindus (Dalits) and Muslims in Tharparkar, Sindh, through a functionalist framework of interdependence. The research finds that while divergent viewpoints persist on both sides, RSP's neutral and inclusive approach enhances mutual understanding and respect. By embedding equity into their policies, such initiatives create space for constructive engagement without erasing distinct identities.

Keywords: Interfaith Harmony, Peacebuilding, Tharparkar, Social Mobilisation, Religion, Rural Support Programmes.

JEL Classification Codes: Z12, D74, O18, Z13, O53

* **Dr Roomi S. Hayat** is an anthropologist and social entrepreneur with four decades of experience. As Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Institute of Rural Management (IRM) and Chairperson of the Human Resource Development Network (HRDN), he has empowered 1.5 million individuals across 20 countries through capacity development initiatives.

1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between development and people is multifaceted, often articulated through terms like ‘poverty alleviation’ and ‘place identity.’ Such concepts reflect diverse perspectives on how development impacts individuals within complex societal settings such as social, religious and economic dynamics (Cantrill [1998](#)). This relationship extends beyond physical aspects to encompass emotional and psychological values of the indigenous people in a region.

District Tharparkar is situated in the Thar Desert in the province of Sindh and lies close to the Indian border in the east of Pakistan. Several languages are spoken with Dharki being the main one.

The PEACE framework underscores that coexistence requires each group to value the beliefs of the other, not as a means of assimilation, but as a foundation for living together harmoniously. This study explored how Dalit and Muslim communities in Tharparkar have been peacefully and harmoniously coexisting for centuries. While maintaining distinct religious boundaries, both groups have historically engaged in limited yet mutually recognised forms of social interaction, suggesting a negotiated balance between cultural preservation and intercommunity engagement. Such interfaith harmony among people of diverse beliefs, regardless of political or economic conditions (Cantrill [1998](#)) encourages constructive and productive interactions.

To counter violence, a practical model of interfaith harmony, understanding, and respect is required that supports the religious views of others and allows for differing opinions without cultivating hatred or conflict. Unfortunately, global religious tensions have made this model difficult to achieve and are negatively affecting various aspects of people’s lives, including their social relationships, access to education, economic opportunities, and overall well-being. Nevertheless, all religions emphasise tolerance, peace, love, and respect for all human beings, irrespective of religious affiliations. Rather than resorting to violence or coercion, they support and advocate resolving disputes via mutual consultation, dialogue and building consensus.

The Constitution of Pakistan guarantees religious minorities the same rights and freedoms to practice their faith as those in the majority. However, recent years have witnessed an unfortunate rise in religious intolerance within the country. This intolerance has targeted not only minority communities but also various sects within the Muslim majority, as evidenced by attacks on places of worship aimed at sowing discord and undermining peace.

Tharparkar has been surprisingly exceptional, as Dalits and Muslims have continued to live peacefully despite the religious chaos and anarchy present in the rest of the country. Dalits constitute a significant portion of the population in Tharparkar, making up over 40% of the local populace (Suthar [2012](#)). One contributing factor was the deliberate segregation in social affairs, with established social contracts remaining intact. Interaction occurred

primarily for essential economic activities or matters of shared interest that lay beyond the boundaries of their respective social and cultural spheres.

The study aimed to examine the impact of national-level religious and ethno-religious tensions on the people of Tharparkar. Additionally, it examined the role of Rural Support Programmes (RSPs) in fostering religious harmony and their efforts towards broader developmental initiatives aimed at promoting interfaith harmony nationwide.

1.1. Study Objectives

The main objectives of the study were to:

- i. Analyse the influence of national level religious and ethno-religious tensions on local communities in Tharparkar.
- ii. Assess the contribution of RSPs in sustaining interfaith harmony and social cohesion.
- iii. Explore community-led models of coexistence that may be scaled or adapted for use in other parts of Pakistan.
- iv. Provide evidence-based insights for policy and development actors aiming to integrate peacebuilding into rural development strategies.

By focusing on a region that defies national trends of division, this study seeks to contribute to academic discourse and practical policymaking in the fields of interfaith dialogue, rural development, and inclusive governance.

1.2. Research Questions

- a. How have RSPs contributed to promoting interfaith harmony and peaceful coexistence between Dalit and Muslim communities in Tharparkar?
- b. What are the perceptions of local community members, especially marginalised groups such as women and Dalits, regarding the impact of RSP interventions on social cohesion and community empowerment?
- c. To what extent do socioeconomic inequalities and external religious influences pose challenges to the sustainability of peacebuilding efforts initiated by RSPs in Tharparkar?

1.3. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its examination of how Tharparkar's communities have sustained interfaith harmony in the face of increasing religious and ethnic tensions nationwide. It offers insights into community resilience, social cohesion, and peacebuilding, all of which are critical for policy design in multicultural societies. Additionally, the study explores the role of RSPs in promoting interfaith cooperation, inclusion, and social mobilisation. RSPs such as the National Rural Support Programme (NRSP) and Thardeep Rural Development Programme (TRDP) are known for their grassroots engagement, and their efforts in Tharparkar are viewed as instrumental in supporting a peaceful, inclusive society.

However, this study also has certain limitations. It was geographically limited to Tharparkar, and while the findings offer important insights, they may not be fully generalisable to other regions without additional comparative data. The research also relied heavily on qualitative data, which, while rich in depth, may benefit from being complemented by quantitative indicators of interfaith harmony, social cohesion, or project impact.

1.4. Conceptual Framework

The World Bank developed a straightforward and objective tool for identifying households likely to fall below the poverty line. Since 2008, the NRSP has employed the 13-question Pakistan Poverty Scorecard for this purpose, having played an active role in its testing and finalisation in Pakistan. The scorecard assigns each household a score for each question ranging from 0 to 100 along with a cumulative score that determines its poverty status. The score categories are as follows:

Table 1: PPAF-Developed Poverty Score Card (PSC)

Category	Ultra-Poor/ Extremely Poor	Vulnerable Poor/ Chronically Poor	Transitory Poor	Transitory Vulnerable	Non- Poor
Score	0-11	12-18	19-23	24-34	35 and above

Source: PPAF (2012).

This scorecard is used by all RSPs to design programmes for extremely poor community members and to ensure their inclusion in Community Organisations (COs), Village Organisations (VOs), and Local Support Organisations (LSOs).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Resource Development and Ethno-Religious Conflict

Tharparkar is a district in the province of Sindh, Pakistan. According to 7th Population and Housing Census, it has a population of 1.778 million with 0.159 million between 15-19 years of age and 0.125 million between the age of 20-24 years indicating a surge in youth bulge (PBS 2023). Furthermore, the literacy rate in Tharparkar district is 36.39% and the Human Development Index (HDI) is 0.25, one of the lowest in Pakistan and, unfortunately, among the lowest globally.

Interestingly, Tharparkar is the only fertile desert in the entire world. The livelihood of the populace of Thar heavily depends upon agriculture. With the changing climate, drought conditions have aggravated over the years. Due to these extreme conditions, Thari people have adopted a nomadic lifestyle or else have permanently migrated from the region for better living and sustenance. Another notable aspect of Tharparkar is its linguistic diversity, with over 13 languages spoken in the region. However, Sindhi is the provincial language

Promoting Peace and Interfaith Harmony

spoken by more than 22.7 million people. Furthermore, there are also various tribal languages spoken in the region such as Brahui, Marwari, Dhatki, Koli and Oadki (Khan [2020](#)).

Existing social science literature largely focuses on identifying and analysing the factors that contribute to conflicts within communities, particularly in developing countries (Humphreys [2005](#)). Majority agree that most conflicts among nations and communities arise due to ethnocentrism, ethnicity and religious beliefs (Christian et al., [1976](#)). Countries experience economic and social impacts, and development initiatives are constrained due to conflicts arising from inequalities and bad governance (Engelbrecht et al., [2009](#)).

Scholars also agree that conflicts are a global phenomenon and cannot be entirely avoided (Burton [1987](#)). However, identifying and addressing the root causes of conflict can reduce the underlying rationale for such disputes. Finding common ground also plays a crucial role in conflict reduction, as many conflicts stem from shared needs such as welfare, security, and justice within a community (Ibid., p.138).

Given the growing importance of conflict resolution, this study focuses on identifying strategies to mitigate conflicts and exploring new pathways to sustainable development, particularly in regions significantly affected by ethnic and religious divisions. Additionally, this paper examines the ethno-religious context and the ways in which community perspectives influence development processes, particularly through the identification of common ground amidst these differences. In particular, the paper aims to gain insight into the coexistence of individuals from different belief systems, fostering a society that serves as a model for the broader global community (Hasan [2010](#)).

The majority of studies claim that a society that has individuals of different descent with dichotomous beliefs, are more prone to conflicts (Wimmer et al., [2009](#)). The indigenous people of Tharparkar are divided into two distinct groups: one group primarily consists of Hindus (including Dalits), while the other is predominantly Muslim. These groups have differing cultural, religious, and social practices, yet they coexist in the region.

Certainly, religion can significantly contribute to conflicts, although establishing a direct correlation can be challenging. Fearon and Laitin ([1996](#)) argue in their study that multi-ethnic societies tend to be more peaceful. Yet, the question remains: why do conflicts arise in some multi-ethnic societies and not in others?

This study focuses on Tharparkar where coexistence was sustained through clearly delineated social and cultural boundaries, reinforced by strict prohibitions on inter-dining, intermarriage, shared use of resources, and certain forms of communication. These norms functioned as informal conflict-management mechanisms, minimising friction between the Hindus and Muslims. However, this balance is being disrupted by improved communication networks and expanding infrastructure, while external influences like

establishment of a '*madrassah*' (Muslim religious school) in Mithi are introducing new pressures that risk intensifying intercommunal tensions.

A significant body of scholars contends that, in addition to religious and ethnic factors, economic, social, and political issues often exacerbate conflicts. While religion and social exclusion alone may not be sufficient to generate conflict, their combination with economic inequalities creates conditions that heighten the probability of conflict between communities or interest groups (Mancini [2008](#)). In this context, cultural and religious differences can be amplified by economic, social, and political inequalities. Stewart ([2009](#), p.17) argues that when the development of resources is pursued inequitably, particularly along ethnic or religious lines, individuals at the lower socioeconomic levels perceive such actions as unfair, leading them to believe that these developments will not benefit them.

Most of believers of Hindu Dharma in Tharparkar belong to the Dalit caste, having several sub-castes. According to Hindu belief, Dalits are a scheduled caste and below the four castes, degrading them to the fifth level, referred to as 'Varna/Panchnama', and is categorised as the most impure which makes them untouchable. Due to experiences of discrimination and marginalisation, many Dalits within the Hindu community have expressed a desire for a distinct identity, separate from Hinduism, and seek recognition as 'Dalits' rather than being categorised within the broader Hindu Dharma.

In Pakistan, Dalits of Tharparkar have three major castes: Meghwar, Bheel and Kohli, out of seven castes. They also lag behind in key areas such as education, financial resources, and housing. When such socioeconomic disparities intersect with entrenched cultural differences, the resulting inequalities can heighten tensions and increase the risk of violence within a region (Stewart [2009](#), p.222). Mines ([1972](#)) compared Dalits with Muslim communities observing that the caste system among Muslims is relatively less rigid. Therefore, this provides Muslims with more opportunities for social integration than Hindu Dalits.

2.2.Understanding the Historical Context

To fully grasp the dynamics of peaceful coexistence in Tharparkar, it is essential to explore the historical context of the region. This analysis will examine the historical relationship between Dalit and Muslim communities, tracing back to pre-colonial and colonial eras.

In the pre-colonial era, although information is limited, evidence suggests a longstanding tradition of peaceful coexistence between these communities. Some historians propose that the emergence of Islam in the area may have somewhat enhanced the social standing of Dalits (Ahmed [1988](#)).

During the colonial period, policies implemented by the British Raj, especially the land revenue system, utilised an approach which impacted many groups including Muslims and Dalits. The land revenue system created an enormous financial burden on landowners, exploiting disenfranchised marginalised groups. Many lower class and rural Muslim

populations suffered greatly under these policies through increased taxation and loss of landownership as well as deepening social and economic burdens alongside prevailing inequities. While both communities faced strife simultaneously during these years, there was also some degree of inter-community cooperation or collective activism (Makki et al., [2015](#)).

After Pakistan gained independence in the immediate post-colonial period, inequalities surrounding education and even land ownership intensified for this community alongside declining socioeconomic status. Yet, the rise of nationalism as well as a common identity among Muslims in the area may have shaped the relations between Dalits and Muslims in Tharparkar, promoting some level of interaction and, at times, agreement on social and political matters to moving beyond their diverse religious and cultural identities. Alongside separate social spheres, this unity may have played a role in maintaining fragile peace.

Before the partition of the Indian Sub-Continent, Tharparkar was administratively a part of the Gujrat district (India). After the Partition in 1947, it became part of Karachi district, then Hyderabad district and later Mirpurkhas district. Currently, Tharparkar is among the most densely populated deserts of the world (Haigler Bailly 2016). According to Pakistan's 2017 Census, Tharparkar has the largest Dalit population in the country.

The name 'Tharparkar' consists of two parts: 'Thar' and 'Parkar.' The word 'Thar' means 'sand ridges' and 'Parkar' means 'to cross over.' Over time, the two words were combined into one.

Hindu and Muslim communities, separated by caste and tribal identity, have long resided in the Thar Desert (Ihsan [2001](#)). Centuries of cultural interchange and reciprocal influence are reflected in architectural similarities, including common materials, designs, and construction techniques. These characteristics show how shared customs and socioeconomic exchanges frequently helped to cross religious and cultural divides, resulting in a unique regional identity that cuts across caste and religious lines.

The Hindu community regards the Thar region as their last refuge for preserving their identity in Pakistan. Tharparkar can thus be seen as a place where the Hindu population has not only sustained itself politically and socially but has also found a sphere for organisation (Khan 2007). The Dalit community in Pakistan, particularly the Meghwar, is actively carving out a new identity. Several organisations are working to amplify their voices and raise awareness about their unique cultural and social challenges.

2.3.Role of Leadership

In Tharparkar, specific initiatives have been taken to foster and promote interfaith harmony with the help of active leadership. Within this framework, this study looked at the work of religious and community leaders. Granted that both groups are usually at odds, the understanding that has developed due to various inter-religious dialogues has helped religious leaders from both sides to advocate acceptance as well as peaceful coexistence through purposeful collaboration geared towards meeting mutual needs. At the same time,

local community representatives like tribal rulers and social elders (*'waderos'*) keep conflicts in check as they enforce order within society. Thus, the customary power and control they possess enables them to avert clashes within their communities.

The intricate connections between Muslim communities and Hindu subcastes, which include the Dalits, are another factor contributing to the harmony between Muslims and Hindus in Tharparkar. To evaluate the effectiveness of RSPs, it is essential to comprehend these dynamics. Development interventions are shaped by the historical marginalisation of lower Hindu castes, who are frequently restricted to isolated, impoverished villages. For instance, Rajputs dominated places like Sonal Beh, but Bheel villages were usually distinct. Lower-caste indigenous communities gradually gained more power as a result of the 1965 and 1971 Indo-Pak wars, which upended established systems (Ihsan [2001](#)).

2.4. Challenges to Interfaith Harmony

Tharparkar still faces a number of issues. Interfaith relations are impacted by socioeconomic disparities that marginalise Dalits by denying them access to healthcare, financial and educational opportunities. Additionally, external influences such as the rise of religious extremism and sectarian violence in other parts of Pakistan pose a threat to Tharparkar's peaceful coexistence model. The establishment of *'madrassahs'* promoting strict religious interpretations may also exacerbate social divisions. Moreover, the Thar desert's susceptibility to climate change, including droughts and desertification, intensifies competition for scarce resources among communities, potentially escalating conflicts.

Most agriculture in Tharparkar is *'Barrani'* (rain-fed) and cattle raising is the only source of income (Hasan 2010). Muslim communities also experience social stratification. For example, people working in debt bondage are considered of lower social standing. However, this segregation is, to some extent not very compelling, as Muslims are more heterogeneous as compared to the Hindu community and can resettle and mobilise easily (Ercelawn and Nauman [2004](#)).

2.5. Literacy Ratio and Gender Discrimination

Both literacy rates and gender equity are low in Tharparkar, and the available figures are a cause for concern. One example is the Parkari community, a subgroup within the Dalit caste, which relies heavily on agriculture for its livelihood either as landowners in the Thar Desert or as tenants working for non-Parkari landlords in irrigated areas. The Parkari community has alarmingly low literacy rates with only 5% of men and 1% of women being literate (PBS 2023). Many villages also lack basic necessities such as clean water, healthcare, and educational services (Haigler Bailly 2016).

The scarce or complete absence of educational opportunities, especially for girls and women, has a profound impact not only on their personal well-being but also on the community at large. Women, who lack literacy, are more likely to experience poverty, gender-based violence (GBV), and have less access to jobs and healthcare. Illiterate

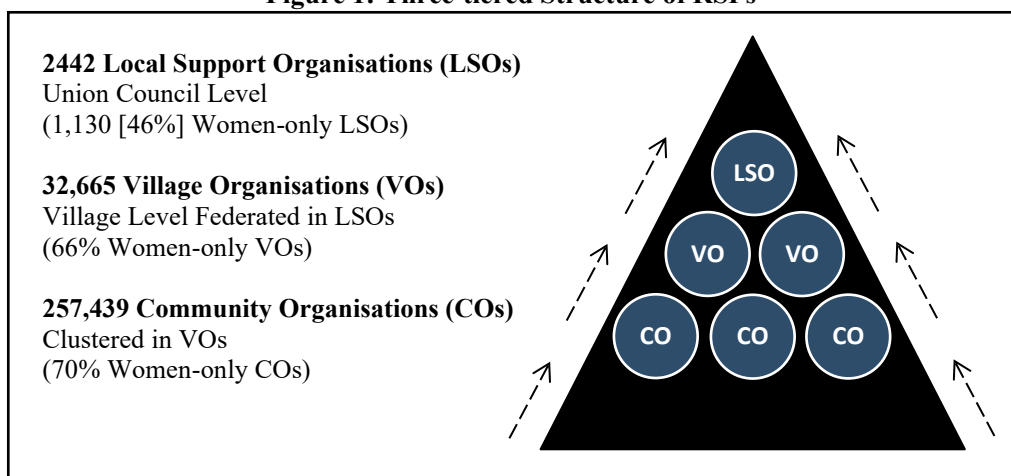
mothers are also less likely to place a high value on education for their children. This lack of education reinforces gender and educational disparities. Poverty and patriarchal norms make these problems worse by limiting women’s mobility and their access to jobs. Thus, breaking the cycle of poverty and promoting sustainable development free from gender discrimination requires putting an emphasis on education and empowering women and girls in Thar and throughout rural Pakistan in general (Abbasi et al., [2023](#)).

2.6.RSPs: Their Impact on Tharparkar

One of the largest non-governmental development models in Pakistan is the RSP. Its efficacy was demonstrated when it was introduced using the model of Gilgit-Baltistan’s successful Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP). Pakistan’s provinces and regions, including Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan, and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), have implemented these programmes. An essential part of the RSPs is the Institute of Rural Management (IRM), which specialises in enhancing each RSP’s capacity.

As a member of RSPN, Thardeep Rural Development Programme (TRDP) strives to improve impoverished communities in Tharparkar, with a particular emphasis on the weak and impoverished. Its strategy is focused on mass mobilisation with the goals of enhancing social conditions, increasing public awareness, and advancing local interests. The poorest households are given priority. In order to promote group problem-solving, it creates COs, groups them into VOs, and creates LSOs in accordance with the conventional RSP model. Before RSPs, such structured forums for community-led action were absent in Tharparkar. The establishment of COs has provided opportunities to convene, discuss issues, and seek solutions together, transcending barriers of caste and religion.

Figure 1: Three-tiered Structure of RSPs



Source: Author’s illustration.

Within the framework of its three-tier structure, the Sindh Rural Support Organization (SRSO) has introduced the Community Investment Fund (CIF) to provide financial resources to marginalised individuals in Tharparkar and other operational areas, targeting households scoring between 0 and 23 on the Poverty Scorecard. The fund is mobilised through a network of COs, VOs, and LSOs, with management taking place at the VO level. The CIF aims to enhance livelihoods, improve the well-being of CO members, and economically empower poor women (Memon et al., [2022](#)).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study consisted of three-pronged research methodology integrating qualitative and quantitative approaches to ensure a better understanding about RSPs and their impact in Tharparkar. The methodology included:

- a. Interviews: Key Informants Interviews and Semi-Structured Interviews (SSIs),
- b. Observatory Data: Participant Observations (PO) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs),
- c. Desk Research: Extensive literature review of published and unpublished documents.

The PO method enabled an immersive investigation of community dynamics, while the KIIs offered insights into the perspectives and experiences of relevant stakeholders. Development specialists who participated in SSIs provided theoretical and practical viewpoints, enhancing the analysis with a more comprehensive contextual understanding. FGDs facilitated a participatory approach, enabling diverse voices within the community to share their experiences and perspectives. Reports from the World Bank (WB), Asian Development Bank (ADB), RSPN, TRDP, and Sukaar Foundation among others, academic journals, and case studies were also examined and evaluated. The analysis of secondary data from international development organisations helped in benchmarking the findings against global standards and practices.

3.1. Interviews

The team interviewed local community members in the district. Additionally, SSIs were held with the CEOs of the RSPs operating in the regions as well as with programme managers overseeing relevant thematic areas under study. Several discussions were also held with RSP officials and local residents.

3.2. Observatory Data

The team contacted and engaged relevant LSOs and Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) to assess and discuss the success of ongoing project/programme interventions in terms of:

- i. Capacity Building,
- ii. Asset Transfer,

Promoting Peace and Interfaith Harmony

- iii. Infrastructure Development,
- iv. Employability,
- v. Financial Schemes,
- vi. Equal Opportunities and,
- vii. Promotion of Communal Harmony.

3.3.Desk Research

The desk research included a comprehensive review of existing literature, reports, and data related to the project. Subsequently, the RSPs - namely SRSO, TRDP, Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF), and IRM - were consulted about the ongoing project interventions in the target area.

3.4.Data Analysis

Qualitative data from KIIs, SSIs, and FGDs were transcribed, coded, and thematically analysed using the Grounded Theory Approach to identify recurring patterns, emerging themes, and variations across different social groups. Coding was carried out both manually and using qualitative analysis tools to organise data into thematic categories such as social cohesion, interfaith harmony, programme effectiveness, and challenges.

Quantitative data collected through secondary sources, including poverty scorecard data and programme monitoring reports, were statistically summarised and triangulated with qualitative findings to validate trends and contextual interpretations. This mixed-method approach ensured triangulation, enhancing the reliability and depth of the findings.

4. FINDINGS

The literature review examined how interfaith relations in Tharparkar were influenced by historical, socioeconomic, and cultural factors, as well as how RSPs can address these issues through community-driven development. Building on this, results from interviews and focus groups showed that RSPs are positively viewed by the community, emphasising their function in fostering interfaith harmony and changing social dynamics. According to respondents, women in particular felt more empowered and had more access to resources and decision-making power. Women also discussed how RSP initiatives promoted inclusion and dignity by addressing taboos. The impact of TRDP and IRM's sensitisation efforts was evident in gradual shifts in attitudes, such as growing respect for people from different castes. Participants recognised the link between these changes and ongoing development initiatives. While religious affiliations still influence social interactions, the study found that social mobilisation efforts of RSPs have led to equal treatment of people from different faiths.

4.1. Impact of Development Initiatives

The indigenous communities of Tharparkar now have a more inclusive and humanistic perspective on intergroup relations as a result of RSPs' community engagement. In an area that has historically been dominated by strict caste systems, TRDP's sensitisation campaigns have promoted interfaith harmony by encouraging respect for one another, community growth, and local employment. Stakeholders emphasised that long-term RSP commitment was necessary to maintain peace. Notably, the Meghwar community benefited from the Union Council Based Poverty Reduction Programme (UCBPRP) (2009-12) through entrepreneurship, education, and training initiatives, which strengthened social infrastructure and promoted harmony.

Some livelihoods projects implemented by TRDP are as follows:

i. Livelihood Enhancement and Protection Project (2012-14)

The Livelihood Enhancement and Protection Project aimed to improve economic productivity and opportunities for poor and ultra-poor families through the 'Livelihoods, Employment and Enterprise Development' (LEED) model. This approach extends across poverty bands, including even non-poor households, to create an ecosystem for economic transformation, socioeconomic development, and poverty reduction, targeting 10,000 individuals.

ii. Southern Sindh Relief, Recovery, and Preparedness Project (2012-14)

The Southern Sindh Relief, Recovery and Preparedness project worked to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; promote gender equality; women empowerment; and universal primary education. It targeted 12000 individuals for improving maternal health, reducing child mortality, and strengthening community and NGO institutions. It had the following impact:

- COs, VOs, and clustered bodies were established and operate effectively.
- Women participated alongside men in economic and social development decision-making and became more visible in public spaces.
- Rights-based approaches and social responsibility were integrated into PO and CO practices.
- Household living standards improved, and vulnerability to economic and environmental shocks was reduced.
- Poor communities gained better access to quality infrastructure, water, energy, and other essential services.
- Communities developed mechanisms for relief, recovery, and reconstruction, including post-conflict and post-disaster situations.

Promoting Peace and Interfaith Harmony

- Women and children gained more learning opportunities and support services, with improved access to quality education ensuring enrolment of all primary school-age children.

iii. Economic Empowerment of Home-Based Women Artisans (2013-15)

TRDP through the project ‘Economic Empowerment of Home-Based Women Artisans of Tharparkar’, with UN Women worked to economically empower 500 Home-Based Women Artisans (HBWAs), from the indigenous, rural, marginalised communities of Tharparkar District. Through this initiative:

- HBWAs increased their income and had better working terms and conditions.
- HBWAs became empowered and instances of gender discrimination considerably reduced.
- The ‘Sindh Provincial Policy on Home-Based Workers (HBWs)’ was developed with legal rights and protection given to HBWs, benefiting 2.6 million female HBWs in the province.

iv. TRDP-Poor Support Programme (2019-25)

Currently, TRDP is implementing a project with the Government of Pakistan (GoP) since 2019 targeting 5000 individuals in Thar. The programme aims to support the ultra-poor and very poor in breaking out of poverty through sustainable means while simultaneously improving their food security, nutritional status, and resilience to climatic changes. The main objective of the project is to enable the rural poor, especially women and youth to realise their development potential and attain a higher level of social and economic wellbeing through a proven, flexible, and responsive framework of assistance.

v. Interest-Free Loan Scheme (2014-24)

Last but not least, from 2014 to 2024, the TRDP progressively supported the people of Thar through an ‘Interest-Free Loan Scheme’, providing small loans without collateral following an economic appraisal of poor households within the relevant Poverty Scorecard range.

While these activities may appear purely economic on the surface, they also function as subtle processes for fostering peace and harmony, promoting coexistence, and cultivating respect among people of different faiths.

5. ANALYSIS

Despite the important role of RSPs in promoting interfaith harmony in Tharparkar, several issues need to be addressed.

Stable funding, community ownership, and ongoing government support are necessary for these initiatives to be sustainable over the long run. However, there are serious risks associated with donor fatigue and fluctuating public finances. Government, civil society,

and religious leaders must work together to address these issues in order to tackle more profound structural injustices that go beyond the purview of RSPs.

Although RSP initiatives in Tharparkar have been successful, connecting these successes with other areas requires careful, customised adaptation and contextualisation. This is another challenge related to the scalability of successful RSP models. Each area has its own special opportunities and challenges, necessitating the use of suitable methodologies. As a result, RSPs looking to advance long-term community unity outside of Tharparkar must address these issues in order to ensure financial stability, address ingrained inequalities, and increase success models.

Elite capture remains a persistent challenge in the region. Providing concessions to dominant local figures has, unfortunately, become a means of ensuring operational access and extending benefits to a broader population. Such figures also try to divert project resources to themselves for personal gain (Sayeed and Hasan [2021](#)). This aspect of the political economy plays a key role in shaping how RSPs implement projects for local communities. However, such compromises risk diluting overall effectiveness and intended outcomes of project interventions (Leao [2020](#)). A way to mitigate this is to target the specific audience based on the PSC indicators.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The case of Tharparkar offers valuable insights into the potential of development initiatives to foster interfaith harmony. By promoting social mobilisation, empowering marginalised groups, and establishing conflict resolution mechanisms, RSPs have played a crucial role in maintaining peaceful coexistence between Dalit and Muslim communities in the region. However, ensuring the long-term sustainability of these interventions, addressing deep-rooted social inequalities, and adapting successful models to different contexts remain crucial challenges.

The long-term effects of RSP practices and their ability to adjust to changing social, economic, and environmental circumstances should be the subject of future studies. Regional comparisons can shed light on the factors that influence the success or failure of initiatives to promote social cohesion and diversity. The role of youth and women in peacebuilding, as well as the impact of technology on development projects, also require more research.

Communities with different cultural practices and beliefs have coexisted peacefully for centuries, according to research conducted in Tharparkar. However, outside religious influences that could encourage intolerance have put this delicate harmony in jeopardy. Through capital formation, skill development, and inclusive social mobilisation, RSPs can be essential players for maintaining an equilibrium. The government must protect Tharparkar's distinctive social fabric and deal with outside disturbances in order to preserve peace. In this regard, several recommendations are listed below:

Promoting Peace and Interfaith Harmony

- a. All stakeholders need to encourage and support initiatives that foster interfaith harmony, particularly in regions with diverse religious populations. Recognise, and respect the social, cultural and religious differences among communities and encourage them to accept the difference with genuine compassion.
- b. Models like RSPs need to be scaled up and replicated to enable access to equal opportunities for education, healthcare, livelihoods and human dignity. RSPs need to work with other development entities in this context to promote interfaith harmony without prejudice.
- c. It is necessary to ensure the constitutional rights of all religions whether those are in majority or in minority. Allowing all citizens to freely practice their religion without fear of persecution will enhance social cohesion and reduce extremism.
- d. All religions encourage consonance and open discourse as alternatives to violence and coercion. This aspect needs to be inculcated within society.
- e. It is important to facilitate and support indigenous ethnic groups, like the Dalits (whether Meghwar, Bheel, Kohli, Bhangi, Gujarati, Oad, and Hindu Bajeer), in preserving and promoting their cultural heritage and social norms in order to protect their sense of identity and belonging.
- f. National-level initiatives should be launched to promote tolerance and interfaith harmony by involving religious leaders, CSOs, and government institutions, as it will have a spillover effect in other regions of the country, apart from Tharparkar.
- g. Education and awareness programmes should be integrated into schools and communities to promote interfaith harmony, tolerance, and mutual understanding

7. FUTURE RESEARCH

This research suggests several avenues for further exploration. Comparative studies involving other regions of Pakistan, or similar interreligious settings globally, could offer deeper insights into effective strategies for promoting interfaith harmony through development-focused interventions. By analysing successful models in different socio-cultural and religious contexts, future research can inform the design of more contextually relevant and adaptable approaches not only for Tharparkar but for other regions with complex ethno-religious dynamics.

Longitudinal studies are also crucial to evaluating the long-term impact of RSP interventions on interfaith harmony. These studies could help identify which elements contribute to sustained success, which factors lead to diminishing outcomes, and how interventions can be adaptively managed over time.

Another important area for investigation is the role of religious leaders and institutions. Their influence in promoting or obstructing interreligious harmony remains underexplored. Future research should examine how their engagement can be better integrated into

peacebuilding and development frameworks, maximising their constructive role while mitigating any divisive effects.

REFERENCES

- Abbasi, B.N., Yang, C. and Sohail, A. 2023, 'Uncovering Basic Educational Skills and Intelligence among Women and Children in Rural Pakistan', *SN Social Sciences*, vol. 3, e116, 12 July, <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s43545-023-00711-w>>.
- Ahmed, A.S. 1988, *Discovering Islam: Making Sense of Muslim History and Society*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Burton, J.W. 1987, *Resolving Deep-rooted Conflict: A Handbook*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Cantrill, J.G. 1998, 'The Environmental Self and a Sense of Place: Communication Foundations for Regional Ecosystem Management', *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, vol. 26, no. 3, pp.301-318, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00909889809365509>>.
- Christian, J., Gadfield, N.J., Giles, H. and Taylor, D.M. 1976, 'The Multidimensional and Dynamic Nature of Ethnic Identity', *International Journal of Psychology*, vol. 11, no. 4, pp.281-291, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/00207597608247363>>.
- Engelbrecht, A.K., Lotze, W. and Bronkhorst, S.V.J. 2009, *Natural Resources, The Environment and Conflict*, African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD), 19 November, <<https://www.accord.org.za/publication/natural-resources-the-environment-and-conflict/>>.
- Ercelawn, A. and Nauman, M. 2004, 'Unfree Labour in South Asia: Debt Bondage at Brick Kilns in Pakistan', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 39, no. 22, pp. 2235-2242.
- Fearon, J.D. and Laitin, D.D. 1996, 'Explaining Interethnic Cooperation', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 9, no.4, pp.715-735, <<https://doi.org/10.2307/2945838>>.
- Haigler Bailly 2016, *330 MW Coal-Fired Power Plant in Energy Park, Block II, Thar Coalfields: Environmental and Social Impact Assessment*, Final Report, Volume 1 of 2, HBP Ref.: R6V04HUP, <<https://urckarachi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/EIA-report-vol-1-330MW-Thar-Energy-HubPower-Company-2.compressed.pdf>>.
- Hasan, A. 2010, 'Migration, Small Towns and Social Transformations in Pakistan', *Environment & Urbanization*, vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 33-50, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247809356180>>.

Promoting Peace and Interfaith Harmony

- Humphreys, M. 2005, 'Natural Resources, Conflict, and Conflict Resolution', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 49, no. 4, pp.508-537, <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002705277545>>.
- Ihsan, H.N. 2001, *Thar, the Great Pakistan Desert: Land, History, People*, Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications.
- Khan, M. 2020, 'Designing Multilingual Classrooms: The Case of Tharparkar', *The Cutting Edge*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 1-21.
- Khan, S. 2007, 'Negotiating the Mohalla: Exclusion, Identity and Muslim Women in Mumbai', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 42, no. 17, pp.1527-1533.
- Leao, I. 2020, *Implementation Completion and Results Report (ICRR) Document – Indus Eco Region Community Livelihood Project (IECLP) – P146252*, Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group, <<https://policycommons.net/artifacts/1263546/implementation-completion-and-results-report-icr-document/1838143/>>.
- Makki, M., Collins, C. and Akhtar, S. 2015, 'Hindu and Muslim Coexistence in Tharparkar: Implications for Development and Social Dynamics', *The Extractive Industries and Society*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 276-286.
- Mancini, L. 2008, 'Horizontal Inequality and Communal Violence: Evidence from Indonesian Districts', In: F. Stewart, ed. *Horizontal Inequalities and Conflict: Understanding Group Violence in Multiethnic Societies*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 106-135, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230582729_6>.
- Memon, P.A., Kalhor, M.R., Tariq, K., Sindhu, P. and Shaikh, S. 2022, 'Socio-Economic Impact of the Interest-free Community Investment Fund: A Case Study of Rural Sindh, Pakistan', *Economies*, vol. 10, no. 1, p.18, <<https://doi.org/10.3390/economies10010018>>.
- Mines, M. 1972, 'Muslim Social Stratification in India: The Basis for Variation', *Southwest Journal of Anthropology*, vol. 28, no. 4, pp.333-349, <<https://doi.org/10.1086/soutjanth.28.4.3629316>>.
- PBS 2023, *Population Census 2023-7th Population and Housing Census*, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, Government of Pakistan, <<https://www.pbs.gov.pk/digital-census/detailed-results>>.
- PPAF 2012, *Assessment of Measuring Impact of PPAF Interventions using Pakistan Poverty Scorecard*, Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund, <<http://www.ppaf.org.pk/doc/programmes/4-ReportOnPSC.pdf>>.
- Sayeed, A. and Hasan, S.H. 2021, *Rural Livelihood Programs in Pakistan: Lessons from the Past as Guide to the Future*, Research and Development Collective, October,

<http://www.old.researchcollective.org/Documents/SAYEED_2022_SARL_Pakistan_Final_May_22.pdf>.

Stewart, F. 2009, *Horizontal Inequalities as a Cause of Conflict*, Bradford Development Lecture, University of Bradford, November,

<<http://www.brad.ac.uk/acad/bcid/seminar/BDLStewart.pdf>>.

Suthar, A. 2012, *Inventory of Resources in Tharparkar*, Mithi: Sukaar Foundation,

<https://openlibrary.org/books/OL30705767M/Inventory_of_resources_in_Tharparkar>.

Wimmer, A., Cederman, L-E. and Min, B. 2009, 'Ethnic Politics and Armed Conflict: A Configurational Analysis of a New Global Data Set', *American Sociological Review*, vol.74, no.2, pp.316-337,

<<https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240907400208>>.