
Peacebuilding Narratives in Conflict Zones: Insights from NGOs Working in Afghanistan and Pakistan

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Abstract

This study explores the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in constructing peacebuilding narratives in Afghanistan and Pakistan, where prolonged conflict, political instability, and social fragmentation continue to challenge sustainable peace. Using a qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten NGO practitioners, and the data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings reveal six interconnected themes: strategic framing of peace, contextual complexities in Afghanistan, civil society narratives in Pakistan, environmental and cross-border peacebuilding, storytelling as a mechanism for reconciliation, and barriers to sustaining peace narratives. NGOs employed locally grounded storytelling and inclusive communication to promote dialogue, strengthen community resilience, empower marginalized groups, and counter extremist narratives. However, these efforts were constrained by donor dependency, political restrictions, and cultural fragmentation. The study demonstrates that NGOs function as influential narrative actors, shaping locally relevant peace discourses and fostering reconciliation. It contributes to narrative-based peacebuilding literature by highlighting the importance of grassroots, context-sensitive communication in advancing sustainable peace in conflict-affected societies.

Keywords: Peacebuilding, NGOs, Narratives, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Storytelling, Civil Society, Conflict Transformation.

Background of the Research

Peacebuilding in Afghanistan and Pakistan remains one of the most pressing challenges in South Asia due to decades of armed conflict, political instability, and persistent social fragmentation (Ullah et al., 2023). Although both countries have received considerable international attention through military interventions, humanitarian assistance, and reconstruction initiatives, sustainable peace continues to be constrained by weak institutions, fragmented governance, and deep societal divisions. Afghanistan has experienced more than four decades of conflict resulting from foreign interventions, civil wars, and political instability, leading to fragile state institutions and limited progress in post-conflict reconstruction (Murtazashvili, 2024). Despite extensive international peacebuilding efforts following 2001, externally driven reconstruction initiatives have often

overlooked local realities and community-based approaches, limiting their long-term effectiveness (Naz & Afridi, 2021). Similarly, Pakistan has faced recurring security challenges, particularly in conflict-affected regions such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where terrorism, violent extremism, and cross-border tensions have undermined social cohesion and community resilience (Ahmad et al., 2022). These complex socio-political conditions underscore the need for locally grounded peacebuilding strategies that complement conventional state-led interventions (Rakhimbekova & Zaland, 2022).

Within this context, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have emerged as important actors in promoting peace through grassroots engagement, dialogue facilitation, and community reconciliation. By working directly with local communities, NGOs foster trust, encourage inclusive participation, and create spaces for dialogue that are often inaccessible to state institutions. Their initiatives seek to strengthen social cohesion, amplify marginalized voices, and address the limitations of conventional peacebuilding approaches that frequently overlook local perspectives (Ejaz et al., 2025).

Narratives constitute a critical component of peacebuilding because they shape how communities interpret conflict, reconciliation, and collective identity (Zelli & Krause, 2025). Through strategic communication, storytelling, and discursive framing, peacebuilding actors influence public perceptions, challenge dominant conflict narratives, and encourage alternative visions of coexistence (Fairey, 2024). In conflict-affected societies such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, NGOs employ locally embedded narratives to counter extremist ideologies, reduce intergroup tensions, and promote dialogue grounded in shared experiences and cultural realities. As Santos (2023) argues, peacebuilding narratives are socially constructed and context dependent rather than simply objective representations of events. Consequently, NGO-generated narratives function as powerful counter-narratives that challenge violence, polarization, and exclusion while fostering reconciliation, trust, and long-term social resilience (O'Connell, 2023).

Problem Statement

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play a vital role in conflict transformation by facilitating dialogue, fostering social cohesion, and promoting community-based peacebuilding. Despite their growing importance, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding how NGOs construct, communicate, and sustain peacebuilding narratives in conflict-affected contexts such as Afghanistan and Pakistan (Rabinowitz, 2025). Existing research has predominantly focused on state-led interventions, international donor frameworks, and military approaches, leaving the narrative strategies employed by grassroots organizations largely unexplored (Angar & Deep, 2024). Moreover, NGOs operating in these fragile environments encounter significant challenges, including political restrictions, donor dependency, security threats, and limited institutional support, all of which influence the credibility, reach, and sustainability of their peacebuilding narratives (Ejaz et al., 2025). Consequently, there remains a limited understanding of how NGO practitioners themselves conceptualize, negotiate, and communicate narratives that promote reconciliation and conflict transformation. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates the experiences of NGO practitioners in Afghanistan and Pakistan to examine how peacebuilding narratives are constructed, adapted, and sustained within complex socio-political environments.

Research Questions

1. How do NGOs in Afghanistan and Pakistan construct and frame peacebuilding narratives within conflict-affected communities?
2. What challenges do NGO practitioners encounter in communicating and sustaining these peacebuilding narratives?

3. How do NGO-generated narratives contribute to conflict transformation and long-term peacebuilding in Afghanistan and Pakistan?

Research Objectives

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

- To examine how NGOs construct and communicate peacebuilding narratives in conflict-affected settings.
- To analyze the political, cultural, institutional, and security-related challenges that influence the development and sustainability of these narratives.
- To evaluate the contribution of NGO-led peacebuilding narratives to dialogue, social inclusion, reconciliation, and conflict transformation in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on peacebuilding, strategic communication, and conflict transformation by examining the role of NGOs as narrative actors in fragile and conflict-affected societies. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize state institutions and international interventions, this research foregrounds the perspectives of NGO practitioners who operate at the community level and actively shape narratives of peace and reconciliation. By adopting a comparative perspective across Afghanistan and Pakistan, the study provides empirical insights into how contextual realities influence the construction and communication of peacebuilding narratives.

The findings also offer practical implications for NGOs, policymakers, development agencies, and international donors by highlighting the importance of locally grounded, culturally sensitive, and narrative-based peacebuilding approaches. Furthermore, the study demonstrates how storytelling and strategic communication can strengthen social cohesion, amplify marginalized voices, and promote sustainable peace. Ultimately, the research advocates for greater recognition of community-driven narratives as essential components of effective and context-responsive peacebuilding strategies.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The study is grounded in the intersection of strategic communication, narrative theory, and conflict transformation to explain how non-governmental organizations (NGOs) construct and disseminate peacebuilding narratives in conflict-affected societies. Peacebuilding extends beyond political agreements and institutional reforms; it also involves shaping collective meanings that influence how communities understand violence, reconciliation, and coexistence. According to Fairey (2024), narratives are not merely stories but strategic instruments that construct social imagination, shape collective identities, and influence public perceptions of peace. Through deliberate framing, peace actors emphasize particular experiences, values, and identities to create alternative understandings of conflict and peaceful coexistence (Çelik, 2021). Such framing is particularly important in fragile states, where competing narratives of extremism, militarization, and exclusion often dominate public discourse and undermine reconciliation efforts.

Conflict transformation theory further strengthens this perspective by emphasizing the importance of changing relationships, attitudes, and social structures rather than merely ending violence. Galtung's conflict transformation framework recognizes that sustainable peace requires transforming the narratives that sustain conflict into narratives promoting inclusion, trust, and cooperation. Santos (2023) argues that media discourse and strategic communication perform an active role in embedding peace values within society rather than simply reporting events.

Consequently, NGOs function not only as service providers but also as narrative actors that deliberately construct messages encouraging dialogue, empathy, and reconciliation. Storytelling constitutes another important theoretical lens within narrative-based peacebuilding. Personal stories enable marginalized communities to articulate lived experiences of violence while creating opportunities for empathy and collective healing. Schmidt et al. (2023) demonstrate that storytelling initiatives in Northern Ireland facilitated reconciliation by enabling victims and survivors to redefine collective memories through dialogue. Similar processes are relevant to Afghanistan and Pakistan, where prolonged conflict has produced deep social divisions and intergenerational trauma. Within these contexts, storytelling serves not only as a communication strategy but also as a mechanism for restoring dignity, strengthening social cohesion, and empowering communities to become active participants in peacebuilding. Narratives are also dynamic and continuously shaped by political, institutional, and socio-cultural contexts. Narrative transformation theory argues that identities and public discourses evolve in response to changing political realities. Sjöstedt and Noreen (2021) illustrate this process by examining how Sweden and Norway transformed their identities from "peace nations" to military participants during the Afghanistan conflict. Similarly, NGO narratives evolve in response to changing political conditions, donor priorities, local cultural expectations, and security dynamics (Srinivasan et al., 2023). This theoretical perspective provides an appropriate lens for understanding how NGOs in Afghanistan and Pakistan continually adapt their communication strategies while attempting to maintain legitimacy among local communities.

NGOs and Narrative Construction in Peacebuilding

Unlike state institutions and international organizations, NGOs possess close relationships with local communities, enabling them to construct peace narratives that reflect lived realities rather than externally imposed policy agendas. Their proximity to affected populations allows them to develop culturally grounded communication strategies that promote trust, participation, and reconciliation. Fairey (2024) argues that NGOs frequently construct narratives capable of bridging social divisions and countering fear-based discourses promoted by political elites and extremist groups. In contexts where trust in state institutions remains limited, these locally embedded narratives provide legitimacy for peacebuilding initiatives and encourage broader community participation.

The Afghan context illustrates the importance of culturally sensitive narrative construction. Angar and Deep (2024) emphasize that successful peacebuilding initiatives integrate local customs, religious values, and indigenous dialogue mechanisms into reconciliation processes. Rather than adopting universal peacebuilding models, Afghan NGOs adapt narratives to local cultural realities, thereby increasing community acceptance and ownership. Similarly, Rakhimbekova and Zaland (2022) argue that Afghanistan's complex tribal structures, ethnic diversity, and geopolitical challenges require flexible narrative approaches capable of accommodating multiple identities and historical experiences.

In Pakistan, NGOs similarly function as intermediaries between communities and state institutions. Strategic narratives have increasingly been employed to challenge extremist discourses and promote peaceful coexistence through inclusive communication. Inam (n.d.) demonstrates that media-based strategic narratives can reshape public perceptions of violent extremism by emphasizing dialogue, tolerance, and civic engagement. Likewise, Ejaz et al. (2022) highlight the important contribution of think tanks and civil society organizations in facilitating intergroup dialogue, reducing ethnic tensions, and promoting pluralistic narratives capable of strengthening social cohesion.

Storytelling, Media, and Strategic Communication

Storytelling has become one of the most influential mechanisms within contemporary peacebuilding because it humanizes conflict and facilitates emotional engagement among divided communities. Schmidt et al. (2023) demonstrate that storytelling initiatives in Northern Ireland enabled victims and survivors to share traumatic experiences, generate empathy, and reconstruct fragmented collective memories. Although developed in a different geographical context, these findings remain highly relevant for Afghanistan and Pakistan, where communities continue to experience prolonged violence and social fragmentation.

Within Afghanistan, storytelling initiatives frequently emphasize oral traditions, poetry, community dialogue, and historical narratives that resonate with local cultural practices. According to Angar and Deep (2024), these culturally embedded approaches provide marginalized groups, particularly women and ethnic minorities, with opportunities to participate actively in peacebuilding processes. Similarly, storytelling initiatives in Pakistan frequently emphasize resilience, community solidarity, and youth empowerment. Shahrukh and Mahmood (2023) illustrate how narrative-based initiatives in Swat encouraged young people affected by militancy to redefine themselves as peacebuilders rather than victims of conflict. Such approaches demonstrate that storytelling functions not merely as a communication technique but also as a participatory process through which communities become co-creators of peaceful futures (Manoharan & Backer, 2023).

Media further amplifies these narrative processes by expanding the reach and legitimacy of peacebuilding messages. Santos (2023) argues that media discourse actively shapes public perceptions of peace actors and influences the social legitimacy of reconciliation initiatives. In Pakistan, strategic communication through media platforms has increasingly been used to counter extremist ideologies and promote alternative narratives emphasizing tolerance and peaceful coexistence (Inam, n.d.). In Afghanistan, however, media narratives remain more contested due to competing domestic and international interests. Bettiza et al. (2023) note that externally promoted liberal peace narratives have frequently conflicted with indigenous understandings of governance and community relations. Similarly, Sjöstedt and Noreen (2021) illustrate how international actors strategically adapted their own narratives while operating in Afghanistan. Consequently, NGOs perform a dual role by translating international peacebuilding principles into locally meaningful narratives while simultaneously representing community concerns within broader peacebuilding discourses.

Challenges to Peacebuilding Narratives

Despite their contributions, NGOs encounter numerous structural, political, and cultural barriers that constrain the effectiveness of peacebuilding narratives. In Pakistan, weak institutions, political interference, restrictive regulatory environments, and security threats continue to limit civil society organizations' capacity to sustain long-term peacebuilding initiatives (Ejaz et al., 2025). Similarly, Murtazashvili (2024) argues that externally designed reconstruction programs in Afghanistan frequently neglected local knowledge systems, reducing community trust and creating skepticism toward internationally funded peace initiatives. These structural constraints complicate NGOs' efforts to maintain authentic and locally legitimate narratives.

Afghanistan presents additional challenges arising from tribal affiliations, ethnic diversity, religious identities, and fragmented political authority. Rakhimbekova and Zaland (2022) argue that competing local power structures often hinder the development of inclusive peace narratives capable of reaching diverse communities. Environmental peacebuilding has emerged as a promising alternative approach within Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where shared ecological challenges encourage cooperation across conflict boundaries. Ahmad et al. (2022) demonstrate that environmental cooperation offers opportunities for dialogue and trust-

building; however, insufficient institutional support and strained cross-border relations continue to restrict its broader implementation.

Youth, Community Participation, and Research Gap

Young people constitute one of the most significant stakeholders in sustainable peacebuilding across Afghanistan and Pakistan. Given the youthful demographic composition of both societies, NGOs increasingly recognize youth as active agents capable of promoting dialogue, social innovation, and community resilience. Shahrukh and Mahmood (2023) demonstrate that youth-led initiatives in Swat successfully promoted peace through theatre, digital activism, community dialogue, and civic participation. Afghan and Pakistani NGOs have similarly integrated youth into peacebuilding programs as facilitators, educators, and community leaders. Nevertheless, challenges including unemployment, poverty, social exclusion, and vulnerability to extremist recruitment continue to undermine youth participation. Ejaz et al. (2022) therefore recommend greater integration of young people into policy dialogues and civil society initiatives to strengthen long-term peacebuilding outcomes.

Although scholarship on peacebuilding in Afghanistan and Pakistan has expanded considerably, significant research gaps remain. Existing studies primarily emphasize state-led interventions, international actors, and donor-driven peacebuilding frameworks while giving comparatively limited attention to NGO-led narrative construction (Murtazashvili, 2024; Sjöstedt & Noreen, 2021). Likewise, although storytelling has been recognized as an important peacebuilding mechanism (Schmidt et al., 2023), limited research has examined its application within South Asian conflict settings. Previous studies have also explored strategic communication and media narratives (Santos, 2023; Inam, n.d.), yet insufficient attention has been devoted to understanding how NGOs develop and sustain peace narratives under conditions of censorship, political polarization, and institutional constraints.

Furthermore, comparative studies examining both Afghanistan and Pakistan remain scarce. Existing research generally focuses on one country while overlooking the similarities and contextual differences that shape peacebuilding across the two neighboring states (Rakhimbekova & Zaland, 2022; Ejaz et al., 2025). Limited attention has also been given to the integration of youth empowerment and environmental cooperation within peacebuilding narratives despite their recognized importance (Shahrukh & Mahmood, 2023; Ahmad et al., 2022). Most importantly, the perspectives of NGO practitioners themselves remain largely absent from literature. Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts a comparative qualitative approach to examine how NGO practitioners in Afghanistan and Pakistan construct, negotiate, and sustain peacebuilding narratives within complex political, cultural, and institutional environments.

Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore how non-governmental organization (NGO) practitioners construct, communicate, and sustain peacebuilding narratives in Afghanistan and Pakistan. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' lived experiences, interpretations, and perspectives regarding peacebuilding rather than measure predetermined variables (Braun & Clarke, 2017). Peacebuilding is a socially constructed process shaped by context, culture, and communication, making qualitative inquiry particularly suitable for investigating the meanings attached to narrative construction. The study focused on understanding how practitioners interpret conflict, reconciliation, and community engagement within fragile socio-political environments.

Semi-structured interviews served as the primary method of data collection because they offered sufficient flexibility to capture participants' experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews. The interview guide contained broad, open-ended questions that encouraged

participants to describe their professional experiences, communication practices, and perceptions of peacebuilding in their own words. This approach enabled the researcher to probe emerging issues and explore context-specific experiences while maintaining alignment with the study's research objectives.

The research was further informed by an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that social reality is constructed through individuals' interactions, experiences, and interpretations. Rather than seeking objective explanations of peacebuilding, the study aimed to understand how NGO practitioners themselves make sense of the narratives they develop and communicate. This philosophical perspective aligns with Fairey's (2024) conceptualization of strategic narratives as socially constructed systems of meaning that shape collective understandings of conflict and reconciliation. Similarly, Santos (2023) argues that peace narratives are performative and context dependent, reinforcing the suitability of qualitative inquiry for examining the communication practices of NGOs operating in conflict-affected settings. The design also reflects the methodological approach adopted by Schmidt et al. (2023), who demonstrated the value of qualitative narratives in understanding post-conflict reconciliation and community healing.

Sampling Strategy

The study employed purposive sampling to recruit participants with direct experience in peacebuilding and conflict transformation (Beedell, 2021). Purposive sampling was considered the most appropriate technique because it enabled the selection of information-rich participants capable of providing detailed insights into NGO-led peacebuilding initiatives. Since the study focused specifically on peacebuilding narratives, random sampling would not have guaranteed the inclusion of participants possessing the required knowledge and professional experience.

The final sample consisted of ten NGO practitioners, including five participants from Afghanistan and five from Pakistan. Although relatively small, the sample size was appropriate for qualitative research, where emphasis is placed on obtaining rich, in-depth data rather than statistical generalization. The cross-country composition also enabled meaningful comparison between the two conflict-affected contexts while maintaining sufficient depth of analysis.

Participants were selected according to three criteria. First, they were employed in NGOs actively engaged in peacebuilding, conflict resolution, community development, dialogue facilitation, or related initiatives. Second, participants possessed a minimum of three years of professional experience in peacebuilding, ensuring familiarity with organizational strategies and community engagement processes. Third, they had direct involvement in developing, implementing, or communicating peacebuilding narratives through community outreach, advocacy, media engagement, or organizational communication.

To maximize diversity within the sample, participants represented organizations operating across different geographical locations, including both rural and urban communities, and varied substantially in their thematic focus. These included youth empowerment, women's empowerment, environmental peacebuilding, conflict mediation, dialogue facilitation, community resilience, policy advocacy, and civil society strengthening. Such diversity enhanced the richness of the data and enabled the identification of both common patterns and context-specific experiences across Afghanistan and Pakistan. This sampling strategy is consistent with previous research emphasizing the importance of engaging experienced practitioners when examining peacebuilding processes within fragile contexts (Ejaz et al., 2025; Angar & Deep, 2024).

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with the selected participants. This method enabled the researcher to obtain detailed accounts of participants'

professional experiences while allowing flexibility to explore emerging issues during the conversations. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, providing sufficient time to discuss participants' organizational roles, communication practices, challenges, and perceptions regarding peacebuilding narratives.

Given the security conditions and geographical dispersion of participants across Afghanistan and Pakistan, interviews were conducted online using encrypted communication platforms. This approach ensured participant safety, protected confidentiality, and facilitated scheduling while minimizing logistical constraints associated with fieldwork in conflict-affected environments.

The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions addressing three broad areas. First, participants were asked how their organizations construct and communicate peacebuilding narratives within local communities. Second, they described the political, institutional, cultural, and security challenges encountered while implementing these narratives. Finally, participants reflected on the perceived contribution of NGO-led narratives to conflict transformation, reconciliation, and sustainable peace. The semi-structured format encouraged participants to elaborate freely on their experiences while allowing the researcher to probe for clarification and richer contextual information.

Interviews were conducted in English or local languages according to participants' preferences. Where necessary, translation support was provided to ensure accurate communication and preserve the original meanings of participants' responses. Prior to each interview, participants received detailed information regarding the objectives of the study, confidentiality procedures, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw without consequence. Interviews commenced only after informed consent had been obtained. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription. Field notes were also maintained throughout the interviews to document contextual observations, participant emphasis, and non-verbal cues where observable.

The flexibility of semi-structured interviewing enabled participants to discuss organizational realities extending beyond the interview guide. Several practitioners described the influence of donor priorities on organizational communication, reflecting concerns raised by Murtazashvili (2024) regarding externally imposed peacebuilding frameworks. Others emphasized community storytelling, youth engagement, and local dialogue initiatives consistent with findings reported by Shahrukh and Mahmood (2023). These insights enriched the data by capturing both organizational practices and broader structural influences on peacebuilding narratives.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2022). Thematic analysis was selected because it provides a systematic and flexible method for identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring patterns within qualitative data. The approach also accommodates both inductive coding, whereby themes emerge directly from participants' experiences, and deductive coding informed by existing theoretical perspectives on strategic narratives, storytelling, and conflict transformation.

The analytical process involved several stages. Initially, interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the data. During this stage, preliminary observations and recurring ideas were documented. The researcher then conducted initial coding by assigning descriptive labels to meaningful segments of text. Frequently occurring codes included community trust, dialogue facilitation, youth empowerment, local legitimacy, donor influence, political restrictions, environmental cooperation, storytelling, reconciliation, and narrative constraints.

Following initial coding, conceptually similar codes were grouped into broader categories representing shared meanings across participants. These categories were subsequently refined

into higher-order themes through constant comparison across transcripts. The final analysis generated six overarching themes that captured participants' collective experiences: strategic framing of peace, contextual complexities in Afghanistan, civil society narratives in Pakistan, environmental and cross-border peacebuilding, storytelling and the power of voice, and barriers to sustaining peace narratives. Throughout the analytical process, themes were continuously reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence, conceptual distinctiveness, and consistency with the research objectives.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles guided every stage of the research process due to the sensitive nature of peacebuilding work in conflict-affected societies. Protecting participant confidentiality and ensuring personal safety were considered fundamental priorities. Consequently, no identifying information concerning participants, their organizations, or specific project locations has been disclosed within the study.

Prior to data collection, participants received comprehensive information explaining the objectives of the research, expected interview procedures, confidentiality arrangements, voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty. Informed consent was obtained either verbally or in writing according to participants' preferences before interviews commenced.

Strict procedures were implemented to protect research data. Audio recordings, interview transcripts, and field notes were stored on encrypted password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher. Interview questions were carefully designed to avoid requesting politically sensitive information or operational details that could expose participants or their organizations to unnecessary risk. These safeguards reflect recommendations emphasizing the ethical responsibilities associated with conducting research among civil society practitioners operating within politically sensitive environments (Ejaz et al., 2022).

Researcher reflexivity also formed an important component of the ethical process. Throughout the study, the researcher remained aware that personal assumptions, academic background, and interpretive perspectives could influence data analysis. Reflexive notes were maintained during coding and interpretation to minimize subjective bias and ensure that participants' experiences remained central to the analysis. This approach aligns with Murtazashvili's (2024) observation that externally imposed interpretations frequently overlook local agency and contextual realities within post-conflict societies.

Participant Profile

The study included ten NGO practitioners representing organizations engaged in peacebuilding activities across Afghanistan and Pakistan. Five participants were recruited from each country to facilitate comparative analysis. The participants comprised both male and female practitioners aged between 28 and 47 years, with professional experience ranging from three to fifteen years. They represented organizations working in diverse areas including community dialogue, women's empowerment, youth leadership, trauma healing, environmental peacebuilding, policy advocacy, media engagement, conflict mediation, and civil society strengthening. This diversity enabled the study to capture multiple perspectives on peacebuilding narratives while ensuring representation of different organizational approaches, geographical contexts, and levels of professional experience. A detailed summary of participants' demographic characteristics and organizational focus areas is presented in Table 1.

Table 1:
Participant Profiles

Participant ID	Country	Gender	Age (Years)	Years Experience	of NGO Focus Area
P1	Afghanistan	Male	34	8	Community dialogue and mediation
P2	Afghanistan	Female	29	4	Women's empowerment and peace education
P3	Afghanistan	Male	42	12	Youth leadership and resilience
P4	Afghanistan	Female	31	6	Storytelling and trauma healing
P5	Afghanistan	Male	38	10	Tribal reconciliation initiatives
P6	Pakistan	Male	35	7	Environmental peacebuilding (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa)
P7	Pakistan	Female	28	3	Youth engagement in post-conflict areas
P8	Pakistan	Male	47	15	Dialogue facilitation and policy advocacy
P9	Pakistan	Female	32	5	Media narratives and counter-extremism
P10	Pakistan	Male	40	9	Civil society strengthening

Findings and Discussion

The findings demonstrate that NGOs in Afghanistan and Pakistan play a pivotal role in constructing, communicating, and sustaining peacebuilding narratives within complex and conflict-affected environments. Beyond implementing development interventions, participants described NGOs as important narrative actors that shape public understandings of peace, reconciliation, and social cohesion through strategic communication, community engagement, and storytelling. Despite operating under conditions characterized by political instability, institutional fragility, donor dependency, and security threats, NGO practitioners consistently emphasized the importance of locally grounded narratives that resonate with community experiences rather than externally imposed peacebuilding agendas. The thematic analysis generated six interrelated themes that explain how NGOs frame peace, negotiate contextual constraints, empower marginalized communities, and navigate structural barriers while promoting conflict transformation.

Theme 1: Strategic Narratives and the Framing of Peace

A dominant finding across both Afghanistan and Pakistan was the strategic use of narratives to redefine peace as an attainable and community-driven process rather than an abstract political objective. Participants consistently emphasized that sustainable peace emerges when communities perceive themselves as active contributors rather than passive recipients of externally designed interventions. Consequently, NGOs deliberately constructed narratives around shared suffering, collective resilience, and local ownership to strengthen trust and encourage community participation. Rather than focusing exclusively on conflict, participants highlighted everyday experiences of cooperation, dialogue, and resilience as evidence that peaceful coexistence was both realistic and achievable.

These findings reinforce Fairey's (2024) argument that peace narratives function as mechanisms of legitimacy by shaping how communities interpret conflict and reconciliation. Participants

explained that framing peace through familiar social experiences increased the credibility of NGO initiatives, particularly in communities where confidence in formal institutions remained weak. Instead of presenting peace as a distant political aspiration, practitioners embedded it within local experiences, emphasizing cooperation, mutual support, and everyday resilience. Such strategic framing enabled NGOs to position peacebuilding as a community responsibility rather than solely a governmental or international undertaking.

The findings further demonstrate that storytelling constituted a central mechanism through which these strategic narratives were communicated. Participants described how survivor testimonies, community dialogues, and accounts of resilience enabled individuals to recognize shared experiences that transcended ethnic, political, and religious divisions. These observations correspond closely with Santos (2023), who conceptualizes peacebuilding as a communicative process in which narratives actively construct social realities rather than merely describe them. Similarly, Schmidt et al. (2023) argue that storytelling facilitates reconciliation by transforming traumatic memories into shared narratives of hope and resilience. The present findings indicate that NGOs in Afghanistan adopted comparable approaches by using community testimonies to humanize conflict, strengthen empathy, and promote reconciliation within deeply divided communities.

Although similar communication strategies were observed in Pakistan, participants highlighted a notable shift in the framing of peacebuilding narratives. Rather than concentrating exclusively on counterterrorism, NGOs increasingly emphasized inclusion, civic participation, and community empowerment. Participants described deliberate efforts to foreground "voices from the ground" that challenged dominant security-centered discourses and highlighted the agency of local communities in promoting peace. These findings support Inam's (n.d.) argument that civil society organizations have contributed significantly to reframing public discussions away from securitized interpretations of conflict toward narratives emphasizing dialogue, coexistence, and pluralism. Consequently, strategic narratives functioned not only as communication tools but also as mechanisms for challenging dominant representations of conflict while strengthening civic participation and community ownership of peacebuilding initiatives.

Theme 2: Contextual Complexities in Afghanistan

The findings reveal that peacebuilding in Afghanistan is shaped by an exceptionally complex political, cultural, and institutional environment. Participants consistently described peacebuilding as a continuous process of negotiating fragmented governance structures, competing political interests, and deeply rooted social divisions. Rather than viewing peace as a single political settlement, NGO practitioners understood it as a localized process requiring continuous engagement with communities, religious leaders, tribal authorities, and other influential actors. This perspective reflects the observations of Rakhimbekova and Zaland (2022), who argue that Afghanistan's peacebuilding landscape is characterized by overlapping political fragmentation, ethnic diversity, and institutional weakness that complicate reconciliation efforts. Participants emphasized that effective peacebuilding narratives required cultural legitimacy. Rather than relying on externally developed communication strategies, NGOs integrated religious values, indigenous traditions, community dialogue, and locally accepted cultural practices into their peacebuilding initiatives. Such approaches strengthened trust while increasing community ownership of peacebuilding activities. These findings reinforce Angar and Deep's (2024) argument that culturally embedded reconciliation strategies are considerably more effective than standardized international peacebuilding frameworks because they reflect local identities, customs, and social realities.

However, participants also identified significant tensions between donor priorities and community expectations. Several practitioners explained that externally funded projects

frequently required narratives emphasizing modernization, governance reform, or institutional development, whereas local communities prioritized security, dignity, livelihoods, and everyday survival. This disconnect often reduced community confidence in externally supported initiatives and created challenges for NGOs attempting to balance donor requirements with local realities. Similar concerns have been raised by Murtazashvili (2024), who argues that externally designed reconstruction programs frequently overlook local agency and indigenous knowledge systems. Likewise, Omar and Djemal Ahmed (2025) contend that donor-driven narratives often fail to reflect the lived realities of conflict-affected communities, thereby weakening the authenticity of peacebuilding interventions.

Participants therefore described adopting what they referred to as "lived peace" narratives that emphasized practical cooperation, mutual trust, and community resilience rather than abstract political objectives. This localization strategy enabled NGOs to bridge the gap between international peacebuilding agendas and local community priorities. Similar tensions between international and local peace narratives have been documented by Sjöstedt and Noreen (2021), who illustrate how international actors continually adapted their strategic narratives while operating in Afghanistan. The present findings suggest that NGOs similarly functioned as narrative intermediaries, translating global peacebuilding principles into culturally meaningful and locally legitimate forms of communication. Rather than rejecting international peacebuilding frameworks, NGOs selectively adapted them to reflect community experiences, thereby enhancing both the credibility and sustainability of their peacebuilding efforts (Kim, 2025).

Theme 3: Civil Society Narratives in Pakistan

The findings indicate that civil society organizations in Pakistan play a significant role in reframing public understandings of peace by promoting pluralism, civic participation, and inclusive dialogue. Participants consistently described peacebuilding as a process that extends beyond preventing violence to addressing social exclusion, ethnic polarization, and community mistrust. Rather than positioning peace solely within a security framework, NGOs emphasized social cohesion, dialogue, and citizen engagement as essential foundations for sustainable conflict transformation. This reflects the work of Ejaz et al. (2022), who argue that think tanks and civil society organizations have become influential actors in facilitating intergroup dialogue and mitigating ethnic and sectarian divisions within Pakistan.

Participants further highlighted that NGO narratives deliberately challenged dominant discourses portraying Pakistan primarily through the lens of terrorism and insecurity. Instead, practitioners focused on stories of community resilience, local leadership, and successful grassroots initiatives that demonstrated the capacity of communities to overcome conflict through cooperation and dialogue. Such findings support Inam (n.d.), who contends that strategic communication has enabled Pakistani civil society organizations to reposition peacebuilding narratives from counterterrorism toward broader themes of coexistence, inclusion, and democratic participation. The findings therefore suggest that NGOs function not only as implementers of peacebuilding programmes but also as narrative entrepreneurs capable of reshaping public perceptions of conflict and reconciliation.

Despite these contributions, participants acknowledged that civil society organizations operate within a restrictive institutional environment. Political interference, regulatory limitations, financial uncertainty, and donor dependency frequently constrained organizational autonomy and reduced opportunities for public engagement. These findings are consistent with Ejaz et al. (2025), who identify restrictive state policies, political co-option, and limited institutional support as significant barriers affecting the effectiveness of NGO-led peacebuilding initiatives. Participants explained that rather than engaging directly with politically sensitive issues, organizations often reframed their peacebuilding messages around education, youth development,

cultural heritage, and community wellbeing. Such adaptive communication strategies enabled NGOs to continue promoting peace while minimizing political resistance and institutional scrutiny (Abubakar et al., 2025).

Youth empowerment emerged as another defining feature of Pakistan's peacebuilding narratives. Participants consistently viewed young people not as passive victims of conflict but as active agents capable of facilitating dialogue, promoting tolerance, and strengthening community resilience. Peacebuilding initiatives therefore focused on leadership development, education, vocational training, and community participation as mechanisms for reducing vulnerability to extremism. These findings reinforce the conclusions of Shahrukh and Mahmood (2023), who demonstrate that youth-led initiatives in Swat have contributed significantly to long-term peacebuilding by encouraging civic engagement and strengthening local resilience. Collectively, these findings illustrate that Pakistani NGOs have strategically repositioned peace narratives around community participation, youth leadership, and inclusive citizenship, thereby broadening the scope of peacebuilding beyond conventional security-oriented approaches.

Theme 4: Environmental and Cross-Border Peacebuilding

An important finding emerging primarily from the Pakistani context was the increasing integration of environmental cooperation into peacebuilding narratives. Participants described environmental challenges as shared concerns capable of transcending political boundaries, ethnic divisions, and historical conflicts. Rather than treating environmental degradation solely as a development issue, NGOs increasingly framed climate change, water scarcity, and ecological sustainability as opportunities for fostering dialogue, cooperation, and mutual trust among neighboring communities.

These findings correspond with Ahmad et al. (n.d.), who argue that environmental peacebuilding provides an alternative pathway for conflict transformation by encouraging collaboration around common ecological challenges. Participants explained that initiatives focusing on shared water resources, climate resilience, and environmental conservation created politically neutral spaces where communities from both sides of the Durand Line could engage constructively despite longstanding geopolitical tensions. Such initiatives shifted attention away from historical grievances toward collective problem-solving and shared responsibility for natural resources.

Participants further emphasized that environmental narratives promoted a broader understanding of peace based on interdependence rather than competition. Storytelling surrounding climate vulnerability and ecological resilience enabled communities to recognize common experiences that crossed political and ethnic boundaries. Similar observations are reported by De Gregorio-Godeo (2024), who argues that narratives emphasizing shared vulnerability encourage dialogue by replacing adversarial identities with cooperative relationships. Consequently, environmental storytelling emerged as a relatively depoliticized communication strategy capable of fostering trust and collaboration in contexts where conventional political dialogue often remained difficult. Nevertheless, participants acknowledged that environmental peacebuilding remains at an early stage of development. Weak institutional coordination, limited financial resources, and strained diplomatic relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan continue to constrain the long-term sustainability of cross-border environmental initiatives. Despite these limitations, participants viewed environmental cooperation as an emerging dimension of peacebuilding capable of complementing traditional reconciliation strategies while introducing new opportunities for regional collaboration.

Theme 5: Storytelling and the Power of Voice

Across both Afghanistan and Pakistan, storytelling emerged as one of the most influential mechanisms through which NGOs constructed and communicated peacebuilding narratives.

Participants consistently emphasized that personal stories created emotional connections that formal political discourse often failed to achieve. Rather than relying exclusively on policy language or institutional communication, NGOs encouraged individuals affected by conflict to share their lived experiences of suffering, resilience, forgiveness, and hope. These narratives enabled communities to recognize shared humanity while challenging stereotypes that perpetuated division and mistrust.

The findings closely align with Schmidt et al. (2023), who demonstrate that storytelling contributes to reconciliation by allowing individuals and communities to reinterpret traumatic experiences within broader narratives of healing and coexistence. Participants described similar approaches in Afghanistan, where oral testimonies, community dialogues, and survivor narratives were used to restore dignity to victims while encouraging empathy among diverse social groups. Stories emphasizing forgiveness, resilience, and shared humanity challenged dehumanizing narratives promoted by political elites and extremist organizations, thereby strengthening community trust and social cohesion (Mielke, 2023).

Within Pakistan, storytelling was similarly employed to amplify the voices of women, young people, and other marginalized communities whose experiences are frequently absent from mainstream political discourse. Participants explained that narrative-based initiatives enabled marginalized groups to become active contributors to peacebuilding rather than passive beneficiaries of development programmes. These findings reinforce Fairey's (2024) argument that locally grounded storytelling enhances the legitimacy of peacebuilding by reflecting the everyday realities of communities affected by conflict. Participants consistently viewed storytelling as more than a communication technique; it represented a participatory process through which communities collectively reconstructed identities, strengthened mutual understanding, and developed shared visions of peaceful coexistence. Consequently, storytelling emerged as both a practical peacebuilding strategy and a transformative process through which NGOs empowered communities to become co-authors of sustainable peace.

Theme 6: Barriers and Contradictions in Peace Narratives

Although NGO practitioners consistently emphasized the transformative potential of narrative-based peacebuilding, the findings also revealed several structural, political, and institutional barriers that constrained the development and sustainability of peace narratives. Participants described peacebuilding as a continuous negotiation between organizational objectives, donor priorities, political realities, and community expectations. Rather than operating within neutral environments, NGOs functioned under conditions characterized by political uncertainty, financial dependency, security risks, and cultural diversity, all of which shaped both the content and dissemination of peacebuilding narratives.

One of the most frequently discussed challenges concerned donor influence over organizational priorities and communication strategies. Participants explained that externally funded projects often required NGOs to adopt standardized peacebuilding frameworks that did not always reflect local understandings of conflict and reconciliation. While donor support remained essential for organizational sustainability, practitioners acknowledged that externally prescribed narratives occasionally conflicted with community priorities centred on security, dignity, livelihoods, and everyday survival. These findings reinforce Murtazashvili's (2024) argument that externally designed peacebuilding interventions frequently undermine local ownership by privileging international development agendas over indigenous knowledge systems. Consequently, NGO practitioners described a continual process of negotiating between donor expectations and locally grounded peace narratives in order to maintain organizational legitimacy.

Political restrictions further complicated the communication of peacebuilding messages, particularly within Pakistan. Participants highlighted that increasing regulatory oversight,

surveillance, and restrictive policies limited the ability of civil society organizations to engage openly with politically sensitive issues. Rather than abandoning peacebuilding activities, NGOs responded by reframing their communication around less contentious themes such as education, youth empowerment, cultural heritage, community wellbeing, and social inclusion. These adaptive strategies enabled organizations to continue promoting dialogue while minimizing institutional resistance. Such findings correspond with Ejaz et al. (2025), who argue that restrictive state policies substantially constrain the scope of peace narratives that NGOs are able to communicate publicly.

Participants from Afghanistan described an even more restrictive operating environment following renewed political instability and changes in governance. They explained that increasing insecurity reduced opportunities for public dialogue and constrained organizational engagement with issues related to governance, human rights, and democratic participation. Consequently, many NGOs shifted toward narratives emphasizing humanitarian assistance, community resilience, and everyday coexistence rather than overt political reform. These findings suggest that peacebuilding narratives are not static but continually evolve in response to changing political environments and institutional constraints.

Cultural diversity constituted another significant challenge affecting narrative construction. Participants emphasized that Afghanistan and Pakistan are characterized by considerable ethnic, linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity, making it difficult to develop universally accepted peace narratives. Messages that resonated strongly with one community occasionally generated limited acceptance among others due to differing historical experiences, cultural identities, and local priorities. Similar observations have been reported by Rakhimbekova and Zaland (2022), who argue that fragmented social identities frequently complicate the construction of inclusive peacebuilding narratives within Afghanistan. Rather than attempting to impose uniform communication strategies, participants emphasized the importance of adapting narratives to local cultural contexts while maintaining broader principles of inclusion, dialogue, and reconciliation. Overall, these findings demonstrate that effective peacebuilding requires more than persuasive communication alone. While narratives can foster trust, reshape perceptions, and encourage community participation, their long-term effectiveness depends upon supportive political institutions, sustainable funding mechanisms, and environments that permit open civic engagement. Accordingly, narrative-based peacebuilding should be understood as one component of a broader ecosystem of conflict transformation rather than as an independent solution to deeply rooted structural challenges.

Comparative Insights: Afghanistan and Pakistan

The comparative analysis reveals both important similarities and significant contextual differences in how NGOs construct and communicate peacebuilding narratives across Afghanistan and Pakistan. In both countries, participants viewed narratives as essential mechanisms for fostering dialogue, strengthening social cohesion, and promoting reconciliation within conflict-affected communities. Storytelling, community engagement, and strategic communication consistently emerged as central tools for challenging violent discourses, amplifying marginalized voices, and encouraging inclusive participation. These findings support the broader arguments advanced by Fairey (2024) and Santos (2023), who conceptualize narratives as strategic resources capable of shaping public understandings of peace and conflict. Despite these commonalities, the two national contexts exhibited distinct narrative priorities. In Afghanistan, NGO narratives were primarily concerned with rebuilding trust, restoring local legitimacy, and supporting community survival within an environment characterized by prolonged political instability and institutional fragmentation. Participants emphasized culturally embedded communication strategies grounded in religion, indigenous traditions, community

mediation, and local ownership. Peace was therefore framed as a relational and community-centred process rather than as an externally driven political objective. These findings correspond with previous research emphasizing the importance of localized peacebuilding approaches within Afghanistan's fragmented political landscape (Dias, 2024; Rakhimbekova & Zaland, 2022).

In contrast, NGOs operating in Pakistan placed greater emphasis on pluralism, youth empowerment, civic participation, and countering extremist narratives. Participants described peacebuilding as a process of strengthening civil society through education, dialogue, and community resilience while challenging exclusionary narratives that contribute to polarization and social division. Environmental peacebuilding also emerged as a distinctive feature of the Pakistani context, where ecological cooperation was increasingly viewed as a platform for promoting cross-border dialogue and regional collaboration. These findings suggest that Pakistani NGOs have expanded the scope of peacebuilding beyond conflict resolution by incorporating broader themes of sustainable development, environmental cooperation, and inclusive citizenship.

Notwithstanding these contextual differences, participants from both countries identified several shared challenges. Donor dependency, political restrictions, institutional fragility, and cultural fragmentation consistently constrained the development and sustainability of locally grounded peace narratives. These findings reinforce the observations of Murtazashvili (2024) and Ejaz et al. (2025), who argue that structural conditions significantly influence the credibility and long-term effectiveness of peacebuilding initiatives. The comparative evidence therefore demonstrates that while peace narratives are highly context dependent, NGOs across both countries perform remarkably similar roles as intermediaries translating global peacebuilding principles into culturally meaningful local practices.

Overall, the findings make three important contributions to existing literature. First, they extend narrative-based peacebuilding scholarship by demonstrating that NGOs function as strategic narrative actors rather than merely service delivery organizations. Second, comparative analysis highlights how socio-political context shapes the construction, adaptation, and communication of peace narratives, emphasizing that successful peacebuilding requires locally embedded rather than universally standardized approaches. Third, by foregrounding the perspectives of NGO practitioners, the study addresses an important gap within existing peacebuilding research, which has traditionally focused on state institutions, international organizations, and donor-led interventions. Collectively, the findings suggest that narratives constitute powerful mechanisms for promoting dialogue, trust, and reconciliation; however, their effectiveness ultimately depends upon supportive political environments, institutional legitimacy, and sustained community participation. Consequently, narrative-based peacebuilding should be viewed as an essential—but not sufficient—component of broader conflict transformation strategies capable of fostering inclusive and sustainable peace in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Table 2:
Thematic Analysis of Findings

Theme	Sub-theme	Representative Codes	Description
Strategic Narratives and Framing of Peace	Storytelling and persuasion	as <i>"Peace is possible,"</i> <i>"shared suffering,"</i> <i>"everyday resilience"</i>	NGOs framed peace as achievable by embedding narratives in lived experiences and persuasive storytelling (Fairey, 2024; Santos, 2023; Schmidt et al., 2023).
	Shifting discourse	<i>"Countering from extremism frames,"</i>	Narratives challenged dominant security-focused discourses,

Theme	Sub-theme	Representative Codes	Description
Contextual Complexities in Afghanistan	security inclusion	to "voices from the ground"	the shifting attention toward pluralism and human agency (Inam, n.d.).
	Political fragmentation	"Donor vs. local narratives," "failed reconstruction models"	NGOs struggled to reconcile donor-driven peace frameworks with local needs and political divisions (Murtazashvili, 2024; Rakhimbekova & Zaland, 2022).
	Local legitimacy	"Community mediation," "religious-cultural framing"	NGOs emphasized culturally embedded narratives to foster trust, legitimacy, and local ownership of peace initiatives (Angar & Deep, 2024).
Civil Narratives in Pakistan	Society in Think thanks and pluralism	"Ethnic conflict," "plural inclusivity"	Civil society organizations and think tanks framed peace through inclusion, countering sectarian, and ethnic divisions (Ejaz et al., 2022).
	Structural barriers	"Restrictive policies," "donor dependency," "political co-option"	NGO peacebuilding efforts were constrained by restrictive state policies, donor dependence, and political surveillance (Ejaz et al., 2025).
Environmental and Cross-Border Peacebuilding	Shared ecological vulnerability	"Water scarcity," "cross-border collaboration"	NGOs framed environmental challenges as opportunities for cross-border dialogue across the Durand Line, emphasizing cooperation (Ahmad et al., n.d.).
	Sustainability as peace	"Climate resilience," "ecological interdependence"	Environmental narratives promoted sustainability as an alternative and less politicized pathway to long-term peacebuilding.
Storytelling and the Power of Voice	Survivor testimonies	"Forgiveness," "shared humanity," "oral histories"	NGOs documented and shared survivor testimonies to humanize victims and encourage reconciliation (Schmidt et al., 2023; Fairey, 2024).
	Amplifying marginalized groups	"Women's voices," "youth as agents"	Storytelling highlighted the agency of women and youth, repositioning them as active contributors to peacebuilding (Inam, n.d.; Shahrukh & Mahmood, 2023).
Barriers and Contradictions in Peace Narratives	Donor-driven contradictions	"Inauthenticity," "narrative mismatch"	Externally imposed peace frameworks often reduced authenticity and created inconsistencies between donor

Theme	Sub-theme	Representative Codes	Description
			priorities and local realities (Murtazashvili, 2024).
	State and cultural constraints	"State restrictions," "fragmented cultural audiences"	Political repression and ethnic and religious fragmentation limited NGOs' ability to construct coherent and inclusive national peace narratives (Ejaz et al., 2025; Rakhimbekova & Zaland, 2022).

Conclusion

This study examined how non-governmental organizations (NGOs) construct and communicate peacebuilding narratives in Afghanistan and Pakistan, highlighting their role as strategic actors in fostering reconciliation, social cohesion, and community resilience. The findings demonstrate that NGOs extend beyond conventional service delivery by shaping public understandings of peace through storytelling, strategic communication, and grassroots engagement. Across both countries, peace narratives were found to be highly contextual, reflecting local experiences, cultural values, and community priorities rather than relying solely on externally prescribed peacebuilding frameworks.

The comparative analysis revealed important contextual differences. In Afghanistan, NGO narratives primarily focused on community survival, local legitimacy, and adaptive mediation within a highly fragmented political environment characterized by competing power structures, donor pressures, and persistent insecurity (Rakhimbekova & Zaland, 2022; Angar & Deep, 2024). Conversely, NGOs in Pakistan emphasized pluralism, youth empowerment, inter-ethnic dialogue, and civic participation while simultaneously countering extremist narratives despite operating within restrictive political and institutional environments (Ejaz et al., 2025; Shahrukh & Mahmood, 2023). Across both contexts, storytelling emerged as the most influential communication mechanism, enabling NGOs to humanize conflict, amplify marginalized voices, and cultivate empathy, trust, and reconciliation among diverse communities (Schmidt et al., 2023; Fairey, 2024).

Despite these contributions, NGOs continue to face common structural challenges, including donor dependency, political constraints, institutional fragility, and cultural fragmentation. These limitations frequently influence both the content and credibility of peacebuilding narratives, demonstrating that sustainable peace requires not only effective communication but also supportive governance structures, local ownership, and long-term institutional commitment. Overall, the findings reaffirm that successful peacebuilding narratives are adaptive, culturally embedded, and negotiated through continuous interaction between local communities, funding agencies, and state institutions.

Practical Recommendations

Based on the findings, several practical recommendations emerge for NGOs, policymakers, and international development partners. First, NGOs should prioritize the development of locally grounded peace narratives that reflect community realities rather than relying predominantly on externally designed donor frameworks. As argued by Murtazashvili (2024), externally imposed narratives often reduce local ownership and may weaken community trust. Greater community participation in narrative development would therefore enhance both legitimacy and sustainability.

Second, storytelling should be institutionalized as a core component of peacebuilding programmes. Structured storytelling initiatives involving survivors, community elders, women, and youth can strengthen empathy, rebuild trust, and promote reconciliation by transforming individual experiences into shared community narratives (Schmidt et al., 2023; Fairey, 2024). Integrating narrative-based communication and storytelling techniques into NGO staff training would further improve practitioners' capacity to facilitate dialogue within conflict-affected communities.

Third, youth engagement should remain a strategic priority, particularly in Pakistan, where young people represent both a population vulnerable to extremist recruitment and a valuable resource for sustainable peacebuilding (Shahrukh & Mahmood, 2023). Expanding youth leadership programmes, civic education, digital engagement, and community dialogue initiatives would strengthen long-term resilience while promoting inclusive citizenship.

Fourth, NGOs operating across Afghanistan and Pakistan should strengthen environmental peacebuilding initiatives. Shared ecological challenges—including climate change, water scarcity, and environmental degradation—provide politically neutral platforms for cross-border dialogue and confidence building (Ahmad et al., n.d.; Marisa & Köprülü, 2022). Integrating environmental cooperation into peacebuilding strategies offers opportunities to build trust while addressing common regional concerns.

Finally, NGOs should diversify their communication strategies to operate effectively within politically sensitive environments. Employing digital storytelling, localized media partnerships, community radio, and culturally appropriate communication platforms can enable peace narratives to reach wider audiences despite censorship, political restrictions, and institutional barriers (Ejaz et al., 2025). Such adaptive communication strategies would improve both the reach and resilience of peacebuilding initiatives.

Future Research Directions

The findings identify several opportunities for future research. First, comparative studies should extend beyond Afghanistan and Pakistan to include other conflict-affected contexts such as Syria, Yemen, Iraq, or the Horn of Africa. Such comparative analyses would deepen understanding of how socio-political environments shape the construction and effectiveness of NGO-led peace narratives while identifying transferable practices across different conflict settings (Holland & Mathieu, 2023).

Second, future studies should adopt longitudinal research designs to examine how peacebuilding narratives evolve over time and influence community attitudes, reconciliation processes, and social cohesion. Since narrative construction is dynamic and responsive to changing political and social conditions, long-term investigations would provide greater insight into the sustainability and impact of NGO communication strategies.

Third, greater attention should be devoted to the growing influence of digital communication on peacebuilding. As social media increasingly shapes public discourse surrounding conflict and reconciliation, future research should investigate how NGOs employ digital platforms, online storytelling, and strategic communication to counter misinformation, promote dialogue, and strengthen peace narratives (Santos, 2023; Inam, n.d.).

Finally, future scholarship should adopt more intersectional perspectives by examining how women, ethnic minorities, displaced populations, persons with disabilities, and other marginalized groups construct and experience peace narratives. Understanding these diverse perspectives would provide a more comprehensive account of grassroots peacebuilding while addressing important gaps within existing literature. Additionally, further investigation into the relationship between donor priorities, organizational autonomy, and local legitimacy would enhance understanding of how NGOs negotiate competing expectations within fragile political

environments (Sakue-Collins, 2021). Such research would contribute to the development of more inclusive, context-sensitive, and sustainable peacebuilding strategies capable of strengthening reconciliation and resilience across conflict-affected societies.

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