Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Local Governance: Experiences from the Erstwhile FATA region of Pakistan

Alamzeb Aamir, Sharif Ullah Jan, Moudassir Habib, Allah Yar, Said Muhammad

Article Details

Alamzeb Aamir
Principle Investigator – HEC NRPU
Assistant Professor – Department of Management Sciences FATA University
alamzeb.aamir@fu.edu.pk

Sharif Ullah Jan
Co-Principal Investigator - HEC NRPU
Lecturer – Department of Management Sciences FATA University
sharifullah.jan@fu.edu.pk

Moudassir Habib
Co-Principal Investigator - HEC NRPU
Lecturer – Department of Management Sciences FATA University
m.habib@fu.edu.pk

Allah Yar
Research Assistant - HEC NRPU
Lecturer- Higher Education Department
aallahyar96@gmail.com

Said Muhammad
Research Associate - HEC NRPU
PhD Scholar Qurtuba University
Smuhammadafridi23@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

To politically, socially, and economically mainstream the former Federally Administered Triable Areas (FATA), the Federal Government 2018 merged them into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province. Hence, a shift from traditional triable government to contemporary administrative systems took place in these regions. This study systematically reviews and explores the progress, achievements, challenges, critical lessons, and experiences learned from post-conflict reconstruction and local governance reforms in the Newly Merged Districts (NMDs). To serve these objectives, the current study collected data in the fields, from the official papers, and the latest literature in this context. The study identified major hurdles faced by the stakeholders in reconstruction efforts, such as widespread devastation of infrastructure, inadequate administrative capacity, historical distrust between government institutions and local populations, deeply rooted poverty, and continued security concerns. Furthermore, the study highlighted the significant reforms, including judicial integration, administrative restructuring, and the introduction of local government elections, ensuring sustained governance and community participation. This highlighted the significance of a participatory approach that empowers marginalized groups (e.g., women) through development programs, involvement of civil society, capacity building, and involvement of civil society and internal organizations to promote transparency, accountability, human rights, and stronger community-state relationships.

1. Introduction

One of the most important stages of a society's rehabilitation after internal strife, bloodshed, or war is post-conflict rebuilding. Physical infrastructure reconstruction, political institution revival, law and order restoration, social reconciliation, and economic revitalization are all part of it (Barakat, 2005). After decades of militancy, military operations, and political negligence, Pakistan's former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), now known as the Newly Merged Districts (NMDs) of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, offer a singular example of post-conflict reconstruction (Yousaf, 2022).

The Frontier Crimes Regulation, 1901, which regulated the tribal territories for a long time, imposed restrictions on political growth and participation. The Pakistani government started a significant political and administrative merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018, following years of turmoil involving both domestic and external parties. This historic move sought to integrate the area into the national mainstream through development initiatives, governance changes, and enhanced service delivery, in addition to ending its marginalization. Reconstruction in the tribal regions has been extremely difficult, though. Widespread home, market, school, and health facility devastation, a precarious security situation, poor state institutions, high rates of poverty, and a long-standing hostility between the local populace and the government are all problems in the region (Idris, 2018). More than simply infrastructure is needed for reconstruction efforts; a genuine government must be established, confidence must be restored, and community involvement in decision-making must be guaranteed.

The robustness of local government systems and the level of community participation are critical factors in a sustained post-conflict recovery, according to scholars (Mac Ginty, 2010; Paris & Sisk, 2009). In the case of the tribal territories, the shift from a semi-autonomous territory to fully integrated districts requires the establishment of efficient local institutions that are transparent, inclusive, and sensitive to the requirements of the populace.

The experiences of local government reform and post-conflict rehabilitation in Pakistan's tribal areas are examined in this review article. It places the conversation within larger post-conflict recovery theories and practices while analyzing the goals, procedures, difficulties, and results of reconstruction initiatives. By doing this, it hopes to draw attention to important lessons for academics, development professionals, and politicians who are interested in areas affected by war.

2. Historical Background of FATA and Merger with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

For almost a century, Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) had a special and intricate place in the political and administrative framework of the nation. The Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) of 1901, a regulation from the British colonial era that was implemented to control the frontier tribes through indirect authority, collective punishment, and limited governmental action, applied to these regions that bordered Afghanistan (Tariq, 2022). FATA was still mostly exempt from national laws even after Pakistan gained its independence in 1947, with political agents controlling local affairs and providing scant protection for citizens' rights (Siddique, 2014).

FATA experienced political, social, and economic marginalization for many years. It lacked contemporary government structures, healthcare facilities, educational institutions, and basic infrastructure. The foundation for susceptibility to extremism was created by this negligence, particularly during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Afghanistan became the focal point for Mujahideen (religious fighters) and other terrorist groups in 2001, after the U.S.-led invasion came to an end (Grare, 2018). This occurred as the government in Pakistan had very loose control over the region, and outside forces were involved as well, turning FATA into a conflict zone.

After extensive discussion, the 25th Constitutional Amendment was passed in 2018, formally merging FATA with KP province. Through this amendment, the administrative, judicial, and political reforms, and political reforms, and extend the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court and High Court to the region (Khan, 2020). However, the merger has confronted several challenges in implementation and development. Nonetheless, there have been numerous difficulties with the merger and renovation. The sluggish pace of development initiatives, the loss of their cultural identity, and the lack of engagement during the reform process were among the issues raised by many tribal members. In addition, a complicated governance environment was produced by the combination of new political forces and well-ingrained tribal structures (Afridi & Khan, 2022).

Understanding FATA's historical background is crucial to grasp the scale of post-conflict rebuilding and governance reform, which must go beyond physical infrastructure to also include social healing, political integration, and the empowerment of communities long affected by violence and marginalization.

3. Objectives of Post-Conflict Reconstruction
The post-conflict reconstruction agenda had the following objectives:
- To implement policing reforms to bring law and order back and provide NMDs access to the criminal and civil judicial processes.
- To rebuild hospitals, schools, and roads that were damaged during the battle.
- To encourage business ventures to lessen complaints.
- By using elected officials, strengthen local government.
- To encourage national unity while honouring regional identities.

4. Post-Conflict Reconstruction in the NMDs: Approaches and Reforms
4.1 Local Governance Reforms
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and the former FATA merged in a historic move to mainstream a hitherto underserved area. But merely expanding legal and administrative frameworks was insufficient. For the newly merged districts (NMDs) to move from decades of unofficial tribal governance to contemporary democratic structures that honoured local customs while offering justice, accountability, and development opportunities, significant local governance reforms were required (Khan & Saeed, 2023). The expansion of Pakistan's administrative and judicial systems to the area was one of the first significant actions following the merger. In the past, the government was highly centralized under the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), and Political Agents had unbridled power. Following the merger, a formal structure of judicial courts, district

administrations, and government agencies was established (Shinwari, 2022). For local populations used to resolving conflicts through the Jirga system, a traditional council of elders, this represented a significant cultural and political upheaval.

The establishment of the local government system was another significant innovation. In 2019, local body elections were held for the first time in the tribal communities' history. People in the NMDs choose their delegates at the village council and tehsil (sub-district) levels during these elections (International Crisis Group, 2022). Municipal services, local development planning, and community-level conflict resolution were among the duties assigned to these recently elected local authorities. Restoring public confidence in the government and allowing citizens to participate in governance were thought to need grassroots empowerment.

Notwithstanding these encouraging advancements, there have been several difficulties in putting local government changes into practice. The acute shortage of administrative capability is one of the main obstacles. There was conflict with local populations as a result of several recently recruited government officials' ignorance of the region's distinct social and cultural dynamics (Yousaf, 2023). Similar to this, the legal system continues to struggle to gain the confidence of those who believe that informal conflict resolution processes are quicker, less expensive, and more socially acceptable than official courts.

Financial devolution has also been sluggish. The NMDs were promised substantial money by the KP government, but the funds have not yet been disbursed because to bureaucratic obstacles, political scheming, and poor institutional coordination. Many local organizations are thus unable to carry out development initiatives or meet pressing community needs (Rumi, 2022). Governance improvements are nevertheless hampered by security concerns. Unresolved tribal conflicts, sporadic violence, and the delayed return of displaced people have all impeded attempts to create the stable and peaceful environment required for efficient government. Furthermore, individuals are confused about where to seek justice because of legal uncertainties caused by the traditional Jirgas operating concurrently with modern courts (Afridi & Yousaf, 2023).

However, there are indications of improvement as well. Through youth involvement programs, capacity-building workshops, and awareness campaigns, civil society groups are increasingly including communities in government processes. For instance, women and young people have received leadership, advocacy, and civic engagement training through UNDP-supported initiatives and local NGOs (UNDP Pakistan, 2023). Through these initiatives, the social fabric is progressively being strengthened and a new generation of NMD leaders is being prepared.

In conclusion, the early changes, such as administrative reorganization, judicial integration, and local elections, are significant milestones toward the lengthy and complicated path to fully institutionalized local administration in the former FATA zone. More funding for institutional capacity, ongoing communication with indigenous groups, financial empowerment of local governments, and more public involvement will all be essential to maintaining current improvements. Due to security concerns, resistance from traditional elites, and capacity limitations, growth is still unequal between districts despite these reforms.

4.2 Participatory Action and Community Development

Conducting research in the post-conflict scenario using "Participatory action research (PAR)" has emerged as a significant instrument; this is particularly relevant in historically disenfranchised regions such as Pakistan's FATA. Furthermore, the involvement of residents in problem-solving, decision-making processes, and governance is highly valued in post-conflict reconstruction initiatives that focus on participatory action. This serves two objectives: ensuring that development plans are more attentive to local needs and conditions while also empowering communities (Chilisa, 2017; Cornwall, 2020). Experts believe that participatory action is a significant way through which the confidence of these triable men could be restored against the government at NMDs of the former FATA, and the reason is that they have been excluded from the mainstream decision-making (Shinwari, 2022). By integrating the local knowledge with community participation, we can establish development goals and solutions to the issues faced by them, particularly in the post-conflict environment (Ishfaq & Noor, 2023).

In the context of NMDs, the involvement of marginalized groups such as women, religious minorities, and youth is one of the critical elements of participatory action, particularly in community development projects (Jamal, 2021). Hence, despite their consistent exclusion over the period from formal developmental and government discourses, they are not offered to take an active part in the rehabilitation process of their community. These community-led projects include the restoration of local infrastructure, increasing access to education and health, and fostering economic growth via skill-training and microfinance initiatives (UNDP, 2023). These projects, on the one hand, have improved local actors' capacity to sustain long-term progress; on the other hand, they have also addressed the community's urgent needs. Moreover, the participatory action has also helped in forming the local development councils and committees, which in turn brought together the local government representatives, civil society organizations, and community leaders to plan and implement development projects (Bari, 2022). These councils and committees then ensured that the local communities were heard and their opinions were taken into account; hence, they serve as a conduit between the community and the state. Moreover, these councils developed at the local level helped in reducing corruption and financial misallocation by increasing transparency and accountability in the management of development resources (Shah, 2022).

On several occasions, the participatory action enabled the local communities to be involved in the conception, design, and management of several projects, including the restoration of hospitals and schools in the community, which is clear evidence of a community-based approach (Leyns et al., 2025). The participatory approach has not only aligned the facilities with the actual needs of the community but also fostered a sense of pride and responsibility among residents. A notable example is the community-driven school restoration project in the KP region, where local community members in decision-making, in-kind resource donations, and labour were recommended for its superb implementation (Jamal & Yousaf, 2021).

Participatory action has numerous advantages, but it also introduces a few problems to the system. Likewise, the history of violence in the regions and the consistent security challenges may adversely affect the effective implementation of community-led

development projects. Hence, strengthening the capacity of local institutions has gained more importance in successfully managing these complex initiatives. Community members often express a strong desire to participate in these processes; however, they lack the technical knowledge and organizational skills required to sustain long-term development efforts (Aridi & Yousaf, 2023).

Addressing the challenges mentioned above posed by limited institutional capacity in the NMDs and history of violence, global development institutions, including UNDP and the World Bank, have initiated training programs and technical assistance to promote conflict-sensitive development and enhance local governance (UNDP, 2023). These efforts aim to empower government structures, enhance the capacity of local communities, and strengthen institutional frameworks (ibid). Moreover, education plays a significant role in fostering participatory action. Programs that emphasize civic engagement, human rights, and democratic values are critical in equipping the local population with the skills and knowledge required for fruitful involvement. Such programs are bridging the gap between formal education systems and the community's practical needs, thereby enabling more inclusive and sustainable community-led efforts (Chilisa, 2017; Aridi & Yousaf, 2023).

5.1 Role of Civil Society and Organizations

International organizations and civil societies contribute significantly to post-conflict reconstructions, especially in the recently merged districts of Pakistan's former FATA, by providing financial resources, technical support, and advocacy for human rights, peacebuilding, and social justice (Khan & Ashraf, 2022). Civil society organizations (CSOs) are essential as intermediaries between local communities and state institutions in conflict-affected regions. They are essential in promoting grassroots engagements, amplifying the voices of marginalized groups such as women, children, and ethnic minorities (Bari, 2022). In a post-war context, CSOs function not only as watchdogs holding the state actors accountable to democratic principles, transparency, and human rights but also as constructive partners in reconstruction and development efforts (Yousaf, 2021).

5.2. Role of International Organizations

Besides local civil society actors, international organizations have a critical role in supporting post-conflict reconstruction efforts in NMDs. These organizations provided not only financial resources but also technical expertise and international best practices needed to rebuild war-affected communities. Key stakeholders such as UNDP, the World Bank, and USAID have been instrumental in financing projects related to infrastructure, education, healthcare, and employment generation (UNDP, 2023). Furthermore, these organizations have facilitated policy dialogue among federal authorities, members of local governments, and the public to ensure that the priorities of the NMDs are adequately reflected in national developmental objectives (Ishfaq, 2023).

A significant contribution of international organizations has been their focus on human rights and conflict-sensitive development in post-conflict reconstruction in NMDs. For instance, the UNDP's social development and governance initiatives have underscored

the significance of inclusive governance and peacebuilding in NMDs (UNDP, 2023). These efforts aim to reinforce democratic processes, strengthening institutional capacity at the local level, and advance the rule of law. Moreover, international actors have played a significant role in addressing ethnic tensions that could complicate post-conflict management and facilitating inclusive dialogue among diverse stakeholders, such as religious and ethnic communities, thereby adding to the long-term social cohesion and political stability.

Moreover, international organizations have played a crucial role in the capacity-building of local governments aimed at fostering democratic and participatory governance practices. Importantly, for instance, the World Bank's Community-Driven Development (CDD) programs have promoted decentralization by strengthening local communities to actively manage and direct their development priorities (World Bank, 2022). Such initiatives have directly affected the NMDs, where the information of functional local governance structures is significant to enable community-led development. Besides governance and economic progress, international organizations have been instrumental in facilitating social healing and post-conflict reconciliation. Institutions such as the "Asia Foundation and the International Crisis Group (ICG)" have enabled peacebuilding initiatives to promote dialogue and reconciliation across several ethnic and religious communities in the NMDs (ICG, 2023). During the long-term these struggles have served to build trust, reduce tensions, and provide the foundation for stability.

6. Challenges to Post-Conflict Reconstruction

In the wake of the merger of the FATA in KP and amid the broader post-conflict transition of NMDs, CSOs have been instrumental in pushing for improvement in local governance. Several CSOs have worked to strengthen governance systems, protect human rights, and service delivery in regions long underserved by state organizations (Shinwari, 2022). This engagement has been particularly significant for ensuring local ownership of development initiatives, for informing residents about their rights, and promoting civic participation (Jamal & Yousaf, 2021).

In addition, the CSOs have given capacity-enhancing training to the state and local communities. For example, institutions like "Strengthening Participatory Organization (SPO)" and the "Aurat Foundation" have sought to strengthen local women, enhance their grassroots leadership, and promote their participation in political processes (Ahmed, 2023). The organizations work closely with the local communities in order to ensure that women are given due opportunities to participate in local development and governance. Moreover, as indicated by Yousaf and Tariq (2023), they also make sure the development of gender-sensitive policies, which address the specific needs of women in the post-conflict nation.

Civil society organizations have actively overseen to ensure that resources are spent effectively and the development projects are implemented properly in the NMDs to safeguard the interests of the marginalized population and that inequity is preserved. Importantly, the Transparency Internal Pakistan has conducted an audit and evaluation aimed at upholding transparency, mitigating corruption, and promoting accountability during the post-merger rehabilitation process (Shah, 2022). These interventions have

played a pivotal role in implementing participatory governance and enhancing civic oversight in regions traditionally known for limited citizen engagement in decision-making.

Although civil societies and international institutions contribute significantly to post-conflict reconstruction, issues remain in guaranteeing the sustainability and long-run effectiveness of their interventions. One such crucial constraint is the absence of coordination among international agencies, civil society actors, and local government, who generally lead to duplicative initiatives and fragmented development outcomes (Bari, 2022). To make sure that resources are used effectively and to align the agendas of various players, more coordination is required.

The limited ability of local communities to maintain development projects in the absence of ongoing outside assistance is another difficulty. Although foreign organizations have been essential in enhancing local capabilities, more locally-driven, sustainable projects are required so that they can function independently when outside assistance wanes (Jamal & Yousaf, 2021). To guarantee that governance changes are firmly ingrained in local communities, more funding must be allocated to the development of local leaders and the fortification of existing institutions.

Lastly, attention on diversity in the development process still has to be increased. There are still gaps in the full integration of excluded groups into decision-making processes, notwithstanding the progress civil society organizations have achieved in advancing minority rights and gender equality. Ethnic minorities, women, and young people still have disproportionate obstacles while trying to participate in government and get resources (Yousaf & Tariq, 2023). Addressing these discrepancies continues to be a top focus for both foreign institutions and civil society organizations.

6.1. Political Instability and Governance Challenges

The post-conflict rehabilitation in NMDs faces severe obstacles rooted in the region's lengthy history of political instability and fragile governance. Before the 2018 constitutional merger of FATA with KP, the region was administered under the "Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR)", which denied residents fundamental rights and democratic control (Shah & Ali, 2021).

The legacy of the FCR has not only stunted democratic development but also left a legacy of political marginalization and inefficient management.

The KP system shift has produced new governance structures, but local government organizations still face significant obstacles in adapting to the change. One of the main issues is the lack of political representation in the initial years following the merger, since local political leaders and parties had limited influence over how the area was run (Bari, 2022). Furthermore, it is more challenging to create a unitary political framework due to ethnic and tribal characteristics. The struggle for resources among several groups within the local community may hinder effective administration and peacebuilding (Qadir & Nisar, 2021).

Additionally, strong tribal elders and local power brokers continue to have a significant effect on decision-making processes, which usually makes it more difficult to implement changes in the national government. This mix of formal political institutions and

traditional power structures makes it challenging to achieve a delicate balance between state law and customary law (Shah, 2022).

6.2. Economic Deficits and Infrastructure Rebuilding

Economic recovery is a major hurdle in the post-conflict reconstruction of NMDs. Decades of conflict have severely damaged local infrastructure, including roads, schools, hospitals, and marketplaces. The region's economy, once reliant on informal trade and agriculture, was deeply disrupted by the violence, leading to widespread poverty and unemployment (Khan & Ashraf, 2022).

Even while there are initiatives to restore the physical infrastructure, money is still a major problem. International institutions like the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB) have made promises, but financing shortfalls still exist and investment and resource allocation frequently go slowly (World Bank, 2022). Furthermore, the region's devastated infrastructure restricts economic potential and employment development in addition to being a hindrance to day-to-day living. For instance, firms find it challenging to prosper when marketplaces and transportation systems aren't operating properly, which further impedes economic progress (Shah, 2022). It's still difficult to rebuild the area's infrastructure fairly and sustainably. The delayed pace of reforms and ongoing bureaucratic inefficiencies have made it difficult to allocate rebuilding funds effectively, which has exacerbated local concerns (Khan & Ashraf, 2022).

6.3 Security Concerns and Militant Influence

The ongoing security threats from extremist organizations are among the region's most pressing issues. The security situation in the area is still precarious despite coordinated military attempts to stop rebel activity. In other areas, militants continue to operate, threatening stability and making reconstruction more difficult (ICG, 2023). These organizations frequently target government agencies and rehabilitation projects, obstructing assistance flow and delaying progress (Shinwari, 2023). International relief agencies and foreign investors face a major obstacle as a result of this security uncertainty, as they are hesitant to make investments in the area because of the persistent threats. Local populations are discouraged from taking part in reconstruction efforts due to the widespread fear of violence and instability, which feeds the cycle of social disintegration and displacement (Shah, 2022).

6.4 Social Fragmentation and the Legacy of Trauma

Years of violence have had a significant impact on the social fabric of the NMDs, and the trauma that the local community has endured is a significant obstacle to post-conflict healing. Families have been split up, communities have been uprooted, and many people have either watched or experienced violence first-hand (Yousaf, 2022). The local community becomes distrustful and divided as a result of this psychological trauma, making attempts to restore social cohesiveness much more difficult.

Social fragmentation is also greatly influenced by the region's ethnic and tribal differences. It is challenging to promote a feeling of national identity and social cohesion since the many groups, who have historically interacted little, are now vying for

resources and political influence. Long-term peace will remain elusive, and rehabilitation efforts would be significantly hindered if these societal rifts are not addressed (Shah, 2022).

Gender inequality also makes societal divides worse. Throughout history, women in the NMDs have been disenfranchised and denied access to official governance and economic possibilities. Even if women's involvement in local administration and restoration efforts has increased somewhat, there is still more work to be done to guarantee gender-inclusive development (Ahmed, 2023).

6.5 Key Challenges in Post-Conflict Reconstruction

The post-conflict rehabilitation of Pakistan's NMDs, previously a segment of the FATA, is faced with a constellation of deeply entrenched challenges. These stem from the region's historical isolation, the effects of continuous fighting, and ongoing socio-political issues are the root causes of these challenges. Effective recovery necessitates a comprehensive and multifaceted approach involving both immediate healing programs and long-term structural changes. Irrespective of significant progress in restoration efforts, the whole success of the development initiative in these areas remains delayed by a constellation of persistent challenges. These critical challenges include social fragmentation, economic underdevelopment, weak governance structures, security vulnerabilities, and the continued marginalization of vulnerable populations. These interconnected challenges underline the need for a more integrated and sustained approach to post-conflict recovery.

7. Conclusion and Future Directions

It is undeniably a challenging and ongoing process to go from a violently divided tribal region to an integrated part of Pakistan's development and governance structure. The 2018 merger of the FATA with KP represented a watershed moment in the region's political history and created unprecedented opportunities for political participation, economic integration, and legal frameworks. Nonetheless, the transitional process has been slow and fraught with structural and operational challenges need to be addressed for long-term advancement and stability in NMDs. However, achieving sustainable peace and development in NMDs remains a complex task, needing comprehensive efforts to address post-conflict trauma, rehabilitate infrastructure, rebuild the governance framework, and foster social cohesion across historically marginalized communities.

7.1 Security and Stability: A Key Enabler for Development

Despite significant improvements in the security situation, the region remained vulnerable to instability and militancy. While military operations and counter-insurgency campaigns have greatly damaged terrorist networks, the peace process remains hampered, disrupted by intermittent violence and the persistent ideological influence of extremist elements (Khan, 2020). Achieving long-term stability necessitates a multidimensional approach that extends beyond military intervention, such as proactive community engagement, inclusive peacebuilding strategies, and conflict resolution initiatives aimed at addressing the underlying drivers of radicalization and fostering enduring social

cohesion (Gul & Khan, 2022).

To mend the scars of the past, the emphasis must change to ensuring peace through community policing, supporting local security councils, and offering reconciliation procedures. Together with educational changes, young involvement in peacebuilding will also contribute to a more secure atmosphere and lessen the possibility that extremist ideology will spread (UNDP, 2021).

7.2 Political Inclusion and Governance: Building Effective Institutions

Politically, the NMDs' incorporation into KP has resulted in much-needed change, especially in the form of new legislative frameworks, representation in provincial legislatures, and elections for local governments (Tariq, 2019). However, the efficient operation of local institutions is still hampered by political marginalization and inadequate governance frameworks. In the recently integrated political framework, bureaucratic inefficiencies still exist, and traditional tribal governance systems continue to have a considerable influence (Jamal, 2021).

Although the governing structure of the region is changing, decades of administrative and political marginalization remain the main cause of its problems. For the official political structures to successfully serve the local communities, capacity building, institutional changes, and improved resource allocation are still necessary to enable their operation. To guarantee inclusive and efficient administration, local political leadership, which is strongly linked to the community, continues to play a crucial role (Aziz & Shah, 2020). Direction for the Future: To guarantee that local communities actively engage in the governing process, it will be crucial to strengthen the ability of local government institutions through training initiatives, administrative structure changes, and empowering community-driven governance models. Moreover, civil society institutions may play a significant role in advocacy and ensuring that government accountability is prioritized at the local level (FATA Secretariat, 2021).

7.3 Economic Development: Overcoming Disparities

The NMDs have suffered from prolonged economic marginalization resulting from decades of conflict, the absence of a coherent economic infrastructure, and administrative isolation (Hussain, 2020). Due to this, the region has remained significantly underdeveloped, with limited employment opportunities, a lack of education, and poor health facilities. The predominantly rural features of the NMDs, characterized by a reliance on subsistence agriculture and acute infrastructural deficits, have further entrenched patterns of economic exclusion (Khan & Ali, 2021). Rehabilitation of the newly merged districts' economy needs a strategic emphasis on sustainable development that fosters economic diversification, including small-scale manufacturing, agriculture, and service industries. Moreover, addressing entrenched gender inequalities and ensuring that women and other marginalized segments in the economic sphere are critical for fostering inclusive growth and equitable development outcomes (UN Women, 2021).

Future economic growth in NMDs must prioritize the attraction of private investment through creating special economic zones, infrastructure development, and employment generation via entrepreneurship and vocational training. Providing access to

microfinancing to the small businesses and promoting the growth of these institution is also essential for strengthening local entrepreneurs and stimulating regional economic activities (World Bank, 2022). In addition, breaking the vicious cycle of unemployment and poverty will require targeted investments in skill development and education, particularly by focusing on women and youth segments of society as major drivers of sustainable and inclusive growth (Ali & Khan, 2020).

7.4 Social Cohesion and Integration: Healing the Social Fabric

The NMDs are featured by a diverse ethnic composition comprising Pathan, Hazara, and Blaoch communities, each having their distinct language, culture, and economic traits. Prolonged conflict has brought widespread social disintegration, with deep-rooted distrust and hostility among various factions. This societal fragmentation is further exacerbated by pre-existing ethnic tensions, a lack of social services, and limited educational possibilities (Durrani, 2020). Efforts to restore social cohesiveness will necessitate more than just economic simulation and infrastructure reconstruction. They must also encompass initiatives targeted at rebuilding interpersonal and intergroup trust, addressing the psychological trauma, and fostering reconciliation by long-marginalized populations.

Long-term social integration in the NMDs results from promoting inclusive social policies that prioritize community reconciliation, psychological support for individuals, and intercommunal dialogue affected by conflict. Moreover, youth programs and cultural exchanges that emphasize peace and a common identity can be effective tools for rebuilding social trust (UNDP, 2021). It will also ensure that the healing process is inclusive by increasing women's involvement in peacebuilding and decision-making.

7.5 Institutional Capacity and Bureaucratic Efficiency

One of the most critical problems with the NMDs' post-conflict rehabilitation is the lack of institutional capability. Years of administrative and political marginalization have left the region with underdeveloped bureaucratic institutions and a lack of trained human resources (FATA Secretariat, 2020). There are still significant gaps in local governments' ability to implement development projects effectively and economically, even with the progress made by administrative reforms.

The growth of institutional capacity must go hand in hand with the advancement of accountability, effectiveness, and transparency in local governance. Establishing mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating development projects and ensuring public participation in decision-making are necessary to meet the region's sustainable development goals (World Bank, 2022).

Building institutional capacity requires expanding public service delivery, strengthening accountability and transparency mechanisms, and training local authorities. In addition, promoting public involvement and community-driven governance will assist ensure that development initiatives are sustainable over the long run and considerate of local needs (Khan, 2020).

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