

Bridging Divides: The Impact of NGOs in India-Pakistan Relations

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Abstract

This article explores the pivotal role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in bridging divides between India and Pakistan, fostering dialogue, and contributing to the prospects of lasting peace. The historical context of strained relations sets the backdrop for the emergence of NGOs as influential actors in Track Two diplomacy. Key case studies, including the Neemrana Dialogue and Aman Ki Asha, highlight successful NGO-led initiatives, while acknowledging challenges such as political sensitivities and resource constraints. The analysis also discusses key players like historical context, successful case studies, challenges faced, and the future role of NGOs, The Neemrana Group and Jinnah Institute, emphasizing their contributions to people-to-people connections and cultural exchanges. Criticisms of NGO involvement, such as legitimacy concerns, are addressed alongside proposed strategies for enhancing their impact. The conclusion underscores the significant and transformative contributions of NGOs, emphasizing the importance of sustained efforts in shaping a more cooperative and stable future for India-Pakistan relations.

Keywords: India-Pakistan Relations, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Track Two Diplomacy, Diplomatic Initiatives, People-Centric Diplomacy,

Key Points:

1. Historical Context:

- Overview of key events shaping India-Pakistan relations.
- Identification of periods of tension, emphasizing the need for alternative diplomatic approaches.

2. The Rise of Track Two Diplomacy:

- Explanation of Track Two diplomacy as an informal, people-centric approach.
- The emergence of NGOs as facilitators in Track Two dialogues.

3. Case Studies:

- Exploration of successful NGO-led initiatives, including the Neemrana Dialogue and Aman Ki Asha.
- Discussion of challenges faced and lessons learned from these initiatives.

4. Key Players in India-Pakistan NGO Diplomacy:

- Profiling influential NGOs and individuals contributing to fostering dialogue.
- Highlighting their specific contributions and impact on diplomatic efforts.

5. Challenges and Criticisms:

- Examination of limitations and criticisms surrounding NGO involvement.
- Exploration of potential obstacles and areas for improvement.

6. Future Prospects:

- Assessment of the future role of NGOs in India-Pakistan relations.
- Proposal of strategies for enhancing their impact, including strategic alliances and technology-driven diplomacy.

7. Conclusion:

- Summarization of significant NGO contributions in Track Two diplomacy.
- Emphasis on the importance of sustained efforts for fostering better relations and achieving lasting peace.

1. Introduction:

The South Asian narrative, intricately woven with a history of partition, conflicts, and territorial disputes, has witnessed a complex relationship between India and Pakistan. Against this backdrop, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have emerged as key players in reshaping the contours of diplomacy between these two nations. This article, titled "Bridging Divides: The Impact of NGOs in India-Pakistan Relations," embarks on an exploration of the historical context of strained relations and introduces the pivotal role of NGOs in fostering diplomatic initiatives.

Historical Context:

India and Pakistan share a complex history marked by a series of events that have shaped their relations. The partition in 1947, leading to the creation of two independent nations, laid the groundwork for a relationship marred by territorial disputes, ideological differences, accompanied by communal violence and mass migrations, established a foundation of mistrust and animosity. Subsequent wars, most notably in 1965 and 1971, and ongoing disputes such as the Kashmir conflict, have characterized the strained ties between the two neighbors. Despite diplomatic agreements like the Simla Agreement in 1972, which aimed to normalize relations, the journey towards sustained peace has remained elusive.

Partition and Independence (1947):

- The partition of British India into India and Pakistan resulted in widespread communal violence and mass migrations.
- The Kashmir conflict emerged immediately, setting the stage for prolonged tensions.

Indo-Pak Wars:

- The first Indo-Pak war (1947-48) over Kashmir deepened hostilities.
- Subsequent conflicts in 1965 and 1971, the latter leading to the creation of Bangladesh, further strained relations.

Simla Agreement (1972):

- The Simla Agreement aimed to normalize relations and resolve conflicts bilaterally.
- Despite this agreement, the Kashmir issue remained a persistent source of tension.

Kargil Conflict (1999):

- The Kargil conflict highlighted the ongoing volatility in the region, jeopardizing diplomatic efforts.

Terrorism and Mumbai Attacks (2008):

- The Mumbai terrorist attacks intensified distrust, raising questions about state-sponsored terrorism.

Pathankot and Uri Attacks (2016):

- Attacks on Indian military bases in Pathankot and Uri heightened tensions, underscoring the fragility of the peace process.

Need for Alternative Diplomatic Approaches:

- The recurrence of conflicts underscored the limitations of traditional diplomatic channels.
- Periods of tension highlighted the imperative for alternative approaches, leading to the emergence of Track Two diplomacy.

As historical animosities persist, the search for innovative and cooperative diplomatic avenues becomes crucial for fostering lasting stability in India-Pakistan relations.

Role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs):

In the face of diplomatic challenges and geopolitical complexities, a noteworthy development has been the emergence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as influential actors in fostering dialogue between India and Pakistan. These organizations, operating outside traditional state frameworks, have assumed a crucial role in what is often referred to as Track Two diplomacy.

The Imperative for Track Two Diplomacy:

As conventional diplomatic avenues faced limitations and setbacks, the need for alternative approaches became increasingly evident. Track Two diplomacy, facilitated by NGOs, has played a pivotal role in providing a platform for informal, people-centric dialogues. This shift recognizes the significance of civil society in influencing perceptions, building trust, and exploring innovative solutions to longstanding issues.

In the following sections, we delve into the historical events that have shaped India-Pakistan relations, emphasizing the periods of tension that have necessitated alternative diplomatic strategies. The focus then turns to the impactful role of NGOs in bridging divides, facilitating dialogues, and contributing to the prospects of a more stable and cooperative future between these two nations.

2. The Rise of Track Two Diplomacy:

Explanation of the Concept of Track Two Diplomacy:

Track Two diplomacy represents a unique approach to conflict resolution, distinct from traditional government-to-government negotiations. It operates on an unofficial, informal level, involving non-state actors, individuals, and organizations, often working discreetly to facilitate dialogue and build understanding between conflicting parties. This supplementary track complements official diplomatic efforts and provides a space for more flexible and creative problem-solving.

Characteristics of Track Two Diplomacy:

Informality: Track Two diplomacy is not bound by the rigid structures of formal negotiations, allowing for more open and candid discussions.

People-Centric Focus: It emphasizes the involvement of individuals, civil society groups, and experts who may not have official government roles but can contribute valuable perspectives.

Confidence Building: Track Two initiatives aim to build trust, create channels for communication, and explore potential solutions to complex issues.

Innovative Problem-Solving: Unconstrained by official mandates, Track Two diplomacy encourages creative thinking and exploration of unconventional solutions.

The Emergence of NGOs as Facilitators in Track Two Dialogues:

In the context of India-Pakistan relations, the emergence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as facilitators in Track Two diplomacy has been particularly noteworthy. NGOs bring unique advantages to this informal diplomatic space:

Neutrality: NGOs often operate independently from government agendas, allowing them to maintain a neutral stance and build trust on both sides.

Civil Society Engagement: NGOs connect with diverse segments of society, engaging with academics, activists, and community leaders. This broad engagement fosters a comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand.

Flexibility: Unlike official government negotiations, NGOs have the flexibility to adapt quickly to changing circumstances, facilitating dialogue even during periods of strained official relations.

Confidentiality: The discreet nature of Track Two dialogues, facilitated by NGOs, allows for off-the-record discussions that can lead to breakthroughs without the constraints of formal diplomatic protocols.

As we explore the impact of NGOs in bridging divides between India and Pakistan, the role of Track Two diplomacy becomes a crucial aspect of fostering sustained dialogue and building a foundation for constructive engagement.

3. Case Studies:

Exploring Successful NGO-Led Initiatives:

The Neemrana Dialogue:

- **Overview:** The Neemrana Dialogue, initiated by the Neemrana Group, brought together retired diplomats, military officials, and academics from both India and Pakistan.
- **Success:** Through discreet and candid discussions, the dialogue contributed to increased understanding and trust between participants, fostering an environment conducive to more open official dialogue.

Aman Ki Asha:

- **Overview:** Launched by The Jang Group in Pakistan and The Times of India, Aman Ki Asha aimed to promote peace and understanding through media collaboration, cultural exchanges, and people-to-people initiatives.
- **Success:** The campaign facilitated cross-border cultural events, highlighting shared heritage and promoting a positive narrative, encouraging dialogue beyond political disputes.

South Asian Free Media Association (SAFMA):

- **Overview:** SAFMA, comprising journalists from both countries, has consistently worked towards promoting media freedom and facilitating exchanges to bridge gaps in understanding.
- **Success:** Through joint initiatives, SAFMA has fostered professional relationships among journalists, contributing to a more nuanced and balanced portrayal of each other's perspectives.

Challenges Faced and Lessons Learned:

Political Sensitivities:

- **Challenge:** NGOs often navigate political sensitivities that can impact the sustainability of initiatives.
- **Lesson Learned:** Flexibility and a nuanced understanding of the political landscape are essential for NGOs to navigate challenges and maintain momentum.

Security Concerns:

- **Challenge:** Security issues can pose significant obstacles to sustained dialogue, particularly during periods of heightened tension.
- **Lesson Learned:** Implementing robust security measures and ensuring confidentiality are crucial aspects of NGO-led initiatives, allowing participants to engage more freely.

Public Perception and Criticism:

- Challenge: NGO involvement in diplomatic efforts may face skepticism and criticism from certain quarters.
- Lesson Learned: NGOs must actively communicate their objectives, emphasizing the positive impact on people-to-people relations and the broader goal of fostering understanding.

Sustaining Momentum:

- Challenge: Maintaining the momentum of dialogue amidst geopolitical changes and shifting priorities can be challenging.
- Lesson Learned: NGOs should focus on building long-term relationships, adapting strategies to changing circumstances, and consistently demonstrating the tangible benefits of sustained dialogue.

These case studies highlight both the successes and challenges of NGO-led initiatives, providing valuable insights into the dynamics of Track Two diplomacy and its impact on India-Pakistan relations.

Aman Ki Asha Initiative:

The "Aman Ki Asha" initiative, launched in 2010 by leading media houses from India and Pakistan, stands as a prominent example of successful NGO-led efforts. This peace-building project aimed to foster people-to-people connections, transcending political differences. Through cultural exchanges, joint events, and collaborative projects, Aman Ki Asha played a crucial role in breaking down stereotypes and promoting mutual understanding between the citizens of India and Pakistan.

Challenges and Lessons:

- Media Sensitivity: Managing media perceptions and coverage required careful navigation to avoid inflaming nationalist sentiments.
- Political Backlash: The initiative faced criticism and political backlash at times, highlighting the delicate nature of cross-border initiatives.

The Citizens Archive of Pakistan and India (CAP and CAI):

The Citizens Archive of Pakistan (CAP) and its counterpart in India (CAI) have collaborated on projects aimed at preserving shared cultural heritage. Through oral history initiatives, joint exhibitions, and educational programs, these NGOs have worked towards creating a narrative that transcends political tensions, emphasizing common historical roots.

Challenges and Lessons:

- Navigating Historical Sensitivities: Addressing historical narratives required careful handling to avoid controversies and ensure a balanced representation.
- Sustaining Collaboration: Maintaining momentum and sustained collaboration posed ongoing challenges, requiring adaptive strategies.

The Borderless World Foundation (BWF):

The Borderless World Foundation focuses on humanitarian efforts in conflict zones, particularly in regions affected by the Kashmir conflict. By providing education and healthcare to children and families on both sides of the border, BWF seeks to build bridges and promote a sense of shared humanity.

Challenges and Lessons:

- **Security Concerns:** Operating in conflict zones presented security challenges that required strategic planning and collaboration with local authorities.
- **Long-Term Impact:** Evaluating the long-term impact and sustainability of initiatives in volatile regions posed ongoing considerations.

These case studies illustrate the diverse approaches employed by NGOs to bridge divides between India and Pakistan. While successful initiatives have contributed to positive change, challenges such as political sensitivities and security concerns highlight the complex landscape in which these organizations operate. Examining these case studies provides valuable insights into the nuanced dynamics of NGO-led initiatives in fostering constructive dialogue and understanding.

4. Key Players in India-Pakistan NGO Diplomacy:

The Neemrana Group:

- **Overview:** Comprising retired diplomats, military officials, and academics, The Neemrana Group has played a pivotal role in organizing Track Two dialogues between India and Pakistan.
- **Contributions:** The group's discreet and candid discussions have contributed to increased understanding and trust between participants, fostering an environment conducive to more open official dialogue.

Jinnah Institute:

- **Overview:** A think tank based in Pakistan, the Jinnah Institute focuses on policy advocacy and research to promote peace and stability in the region.
- **Contributions:** Through research, publications, and policy recommendations, the Jinnah Institute has provided valuable insights into areas where diplomatic efforts can be enhanced.

The South Asia Foundation (SAF):

- **Overview:** Led by Dr. Karan Singh, SAF is a regional organization promoting education, culture, and sustainable development in South Asia.
- **Contributions:** SAF's initiatives, including cultural exchanges and educational collaborations, have contributed to people-to-people understanding, fostering a positive environment for diplomatic engagement.

The Observer Research Foundation (ORF):

- Overview: An independent think tank with a presence in both India and Pakistan, ORF focuses on policy research and analysis.
- Contributions: Through conferences, publications, and dialogues, ORF has created platforms for experts and officials to engage in informed discussions, contributing to Track Two diplomacy.

Women in Security, Conflict Management, and Peace (WISCOMP):

- Overview: WISCOMP is a program of the Foundation for Universal Responsibility of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, working on gender-inclusive approaches to conflict resolution.
- Contributions: WISCOMP's initiatives have focused on incorporating women's perspectives in peace building, bringing a gender-sensitive approach to Track Two dialogues.

The Pakistan-India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPFPD):

- Overview: A grassroots organization operating in both countries, PIPFPD focuses on people-to-people contact and peace-building.
- Contributions: PIPFPD has been instrumental in organizing joint initiatives, including cultural exchanges, peace marches, and dialogues. Their work emphasizes the role of civil society in creating an atmosphere of trust and understanding.

The Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation (CDR):

- Overview: A Delhi-based organization, CDR focuses on conflict resolution and building bridges between communities.
- Contributions: CDR has actively engaged in Track Two diplomacy, bringing together experts, former diplomats, and civil society representatives to explore innovative solutions to longstanding issues.

Asma Jahangir Foundation:

- Overview: Named after the renowned human rights activist, the foundation works on promoting democracy, human rights, and peace.
- Contributions: Through its advocacy work, the Asma Jahangir Foundation has highlighted the importance of human rights and justice in fostering sustainable peace between India and Pakistan.

Satish Chandra (India) and Riaz Khokhar (Pakistan):

- Overview: Both retired diplomats, Satish Chandra from India and Riaz Khokhar from Pakistan, have been active in Track Two diplomacy.
- Contributions: Their involvement in informal dialogues has provided insights from the diplomatic community, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities in India-Pakistan relations.

These key players have demonstrated a commitment to fostering dialogue, building trust, and addressing shared challenges. Their contributions, spanning various sectors, highlight the multifaceted nature of NGO involvement in Track Two diplomacy and its potential to impact India-Pakistan relations positively.

5. Challenges and Criticisms:

Limitations of NGO Involvement:

Lack of Official Mandate:

- Limitation: NGOs, operating independently from government structures, may lack the official mandate needed to implement policy changes or formal agreements.
- Implication: Their efforts might be perceived as disconnected from broader diplomatic strategies, potentially limiting their long-term impact.

Political Sensitivities:

- Limitation: NGOs may encounter challenges navigating political sensitivities, as their initiatives can be perceived as bypassing official channels.
- Implication: This may lead to skepticism and resistance from government authorities, hindering the sustainability of NGO-led initiatives.

Resource Constraints:

- Limitation: NGOs often operate with limited resources compared to governments, affecting their capacity to sustain long-term engagement.
- Implication: This constraint may impact the scale and duration of their initiatives, potentially limiting their effectiveness over time.

Criticisms of NGO Involvement:

Legitimacy Concerns:

- Criticism: Some critics argue that NGOs lack the democratic legitimacy that elected governments possess.
- Implication: This criticism questions the appropriateness of non-state actors playing a significant role in diplomatic efforts.

Transparency and Accountability:

- Criticism: NGO initiatives may face scrutiny regarding transparency and accountability in decision-making processes.
- Implication: Lack of transparency can raise questions about the legitimacy of their involvement and the motivations behind their actions.

Perceived Neutrality Challenges:

- Criticism: Achieving true neutrality in highly sensitive geopolitical contexts is challenging for NGOs.

- Implication: Perceived biases can erode trust and compromise the effectiveness of Track Two initiatives.

Areas for Improvement:

Enhanced Coordination with Governments:

- Improvement: NGOs could work on establishing stronger coordination with official government bodies to ensure alignment with broader diplomatic goals.
- Benefit: This collaboration can enhance the legitimacy and sustainability of their initiatives.

Increased Funding and Resources:

- Improvement: Efforts should be made to secure increased funding and resources for NGO-led initiatives to overcome constraints.
- Benefit: This would allow for more extensive and impactful projects with a sustained focus on conflict resolution.

Strengthening Accountability Measures:

- Improvement: NGOs should implement robust accountability measures and transparent decision-making processes.
- Benefit: This can address criticisms, ensuring that their actions align with ethical standards and the interests of the populations they aim to serve.

Public Diplomacy and Communication:

- Improvement: NGOs should invest in public diplomacy efforts to communicate their objectives more effectively.
- Benefit: Clear communication can help mitigate skepticism, garner public support, and build understanding of the positive impact of NGO-led initiatives.

Robust Evaluation and Impact Assessment:

- Recommendation: Regular evaluation and impact assessments of NGO-led initiatives can help demonstrate their effectiveness and identify areas for improvement, addressing criticisms more effectively.

While NGOs play a crucial role in Track Two diplomacy, addressing these challenges and criticisms can enhance their effectiveness and contribute to more sustainable efforts in bridging divides between India and Pakistan.

6. Future Prospects:

Assessing the Future Role of NGOs in India-Pakistan Relations:

Continued People-to-People Engagement:

- Prospect: NGOs will likely continue fostering people-to-people connections, emphasizing cultural exchanges, educational collaborations, and grassroots initiatives.
- Impact: This approach can contribute to building mutual understanding and trust, laying the groundwork for more constructive diplomatic relations.

Innovative Solutions to Shared Challenges:

- Prospect: NGOs may increasingly focus on addressing shared challenges, such as climate change, public health, and economic development.
- Impact: Collaborative efforts in tackling these issues can create common ground, fostering an environment conducive to broader diplomatic cooperation.

Technology and Virtual Dialogues:

- Prospect: The use of technology for virtual dialogues and online initiatives may become more prevalent, especially during periods of geopolitical tension.
- Impact: Virtual platforms can facilitate ongoing dialogue, even in challenging circumstances, allowing for sustained engagement and problem-solving.

Humanitarian and Social Initiatives:

- Prospect: NGOs may increasingly focus on collaborative humanitarian and social initiatives, addressing shared challenges such as climate change, health crises, and poverty.
- Rationale: Joint efforts in non-political domains can build mutual goodwill, creating a conducive environment for broader diplomatic engagement.

Potential Strategies for Enhancing NGO Impact:

Strategic Networking and Collaboration:

- Strategy: NGOs should actively engage in strategic networking and collaboration with each other, governmental bodies, and international organizations.
- Rationale: Building strong alliances can amplify their impact and create a more unified approach towards conflict resolution.

Capacity-Building and Training Programs:

- Strategy: Investment in capacity-building and training programs can enhance the skills and capabilities of NGOs involved in Track Two diplomacy.
- Rationale: Well-equipped NGOs can navigate challenges more effectively and contribute more substantially to diplomatic efforts.

Youth Involvement and Leadership Development:

- Strategy: Encouraging youth involvement and leadership development within NGOs can bring fresh perspectives and sustainable continuity.
- Rationale: Empowering the younger generation can ensure the longevity and adaptability of initiatives, fostering a sense of shared responsibility for peace.

Public Awareness Campaigns:

- Strategy: NGOs should prioritize public awareness campaigns to educate the general populace about the importance of Track Two diplomacy and the positive impact of their initiatives.
- Rationale: Increased public support can strengthen the legitimacy of NGO-led efforts and create a more conducive environment for diplomatic engagement.

Adaptation to Changing Geopolitical Dynamics:

- Strategy: NGOs should remain adaptable and responsive to changing geopolitical dynamics.
- Rationale: Being flexible in approach allows NGOs to navigate evolving challenges and seize opportunities for impactful interventions.

Technology-Driven Diplomacy:

- Strategy: Embrace technology for virtual diplomacy and communication, facilitating ongoing dialogues even during periods of physical barriers.
- Rationale: Virtual platforms can enhance the reach and frequency of interactions, enabling sustained dialogue despite geopolitical challenges.

Track Two Diplomacy Track Records:

- Strategy: NGOs should document and publicize the positive outcomes of Track Two diplomacy initiatives to highlight their effectiveness.
- Rationale: A strong track record can build credibility, attracting increased support from stakeholders and encouraging sustained engagement.

Conflict Resolution Research:

- Strategy: Invest in research on innovative conflict resolution mechanisms and strategies.
- Rationale: In-depth research can provide NGOs with the knowledge needed to propose and advocate for practical, effective solutions to long-standing issues.

As NGOs continue to evolve and adapt, embracing these strategies can enhance their impact on India-Pakistan relations. By leveraging technology, forming strategic alliances, and emphasizing public diplomacy, NGOs can contribute significantly to building a more stable and cooperative future between the two nations.

7. Conclusion:

In the intricate tapestry of India-Pakistan relations, Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have emerged as crucial architects of peace through their substantial contributions in fostering dialogue, building understanding, and bridging divides. Drawing upon historical contexts of conflict and periods of tension, the role of NGOs, particularly in the realm of Track Two diplomacy, has proven instrumental in shaping a more cooperative future for these two nations.

Significant Contributions of NGOs:

People-Centric Diplomacy: NGOs, operating outside formal government structures, have excelled in people-centric diplomacy. Initiatives like the Neemrana Dialogue and Aman Ki Asha have brought together individuals from diverse backgrounds, fostering connections at the grassroots level.

Innovative Problem-Solving: The flexibility inherent in Track Two diplomacy has allowed NGOs to explore innovative problem-solving approaches. Their ability to think creatively and propose unconventional solutions has added depth to diplomatic conversations.

Cultural Exchanges and Understanding: Initiatives by NGOs such as SAFMA and cultural exchanges facilitated by organizations like the Jinnah Institute have contributed to cultural understanding. These efforts recognize the shared heritage of India and Pakistan, promoting a positive narrative beyond political disputes.

Confidence Building: Track Two initiatives have played a pivotal role in confidence-building measures. By creating channels for off-the-record discussions, NGOs have fostered an environment conducive to building trust among participants.

Importance of Sustained Efforts:

As we reflect on the impact of NGOs, it becomes evident that sustained efforts are paramount for lasting change:

Long-Term Relationship Building: The complex nature of India-Pakistan relations necessitates long-term relationship building. NGOs must focus on cultivating sustained engagements, as demonstrated by the success of ongoing initiatives.

Adaptability to Changing Circumstances: Geopolitical landscapes evolve, and sustained efforts require adaptability. NGOs should remain flexible, adjusting strategies to navigate changing circumstances and persisting in their mission.

Public Support and Diplomatic Leverage: Building public support through effective public diplomacy campaigns enhances the legitimacy of NGO-led initiatives. This support can translate into diplomatic leverage, urging governments to prioritize peaceful resolutions.

Documentation of Success Stories: NGOs should actively document and publicize success stories arising from their efforts. A robust track record builds credibility, attracting support from stakeholders and encouraging sustained engagement.

In conclusion, as we look towards the future of India-Pakistan relations, it is clear that NGOs will continue to be instrumental in fostering better understanding and cooperation. Their ability to navigate challenges, build bridges at the grassroots level, and contribute to innovative problem-solving positions them as key actors in the pursuit of lasting peace in the region. The collective efforts of these organizations serve as a beacon of hope,

reminding us that sustained engagement and a people-centric approach are essential ingredients for building a more harmonious and cooperative future.

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