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# **Unheard voices:** engaging youth of Gilgit-Baltistan

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*Cover photo: Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan © Naseer Kazmi*



Map of Jammu and Kashmir region  
 © Kashmir Study Group

## Executive summary

This research seeks to explore the sociopolitical and economic factors affecting the young people of Gilgit-Baltistan in the context of its undefined status and the conflict over Jammu and Kashmir. This paper aims to highlight the largely unheard voices of young people of Gilgit-Baltistan. It is based on a series of focus group discussions with young people in Gilgit-Baltistan drawn from across the community and from responses to a questionnaire survey. In total, 425 young people (aged 18–35) participated in the research. Almost 30 per cent of the participants were women.

Most young people felt that the pressing problems of the youth in Gilgit-Baltistan stem from its ambiguous and undefined status, which is caught between Pakistan’s governance structure and the international dispute over the status of the former British princely state of Jammu and Kashmir. Currently, Gilgit-Baltistan is neither a province of Pakistan nor the formal part of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) which is regarded as the successor administration of the last ruler of Jammu and Kashmir state (Maharaja Hari Singh, 1925–1947) in Pakistan’s official narrative. This constitutional limbo means that Gilgit-Baltistan has an undefined status and suffers from political ambiguity, and this colours and shapes the views of young people on a range of issues that affect their lives.

This research explored attitudes to identity, governance (including the latest political settlement established through the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order 2009), sectarianism, education and economic development and opportunities.

### Identity

- Young people generally wish to associate themselves with the larger political and constitutional structure of Pakistan. Almost 82 per cent of the youth surveyed prefer to call themselves Pakistanis and disassociate themselves from the larger Kashmiri identity.
- Most people interviewed wanted to see Gilgit-Baltistan fully integrated as a fifth province of Pakistan. Due to its historical links to the Kashmir conflict and Pakistan’s commitment at international forums such as United Nations Security Council, Pakistan has denied this status to Gilgit-Baltistan.
- Some young people, specifically those belonging to nationalist parties, are strongly opposed to conferring provincial or quasi-provincial status on Gilgit-Baltistan, believing that this would compromise the Kashmir conflict and undermine organic unity of the former state of Jammu and Kashmir.



*Participants of Focus Group Discussion (FGD) held in Gilgit city (2012) preparing presentation on economic issues faced by young people. © CPDR*

- Attitudes to AJK are complex. Young people of Gilgit-Baltistan believe, perhaps erroneously, that AJK is far more prosperous and autonomous, with its own functioning assembly and independent institutions.
- Most participants feel that there is a huge trust deficit between the people in Gilgit-Baltistan and AJK. Many young people in Gilgit-Baltistan feel that the AJK leadership remains a key obstacle when it comes to granting them political rights.
- Many underlined the need to reopen the old road link between the two territories to help rebuild a relationship based on mutual trust and respect and to explore where the two territories could cooperate on a shared agenda.
- Despite the general welcome for the 2009 Order, it falls far short of most people's aspirations. There remains a democratic deficit. Young people across the board sharply criticise the role and functions of the Gilgit-Baltistan Council, which they feel is unaccountable given that a majority of seats are federal government appointments.
- Young people believe that the current government has failed in delivering basic services to the public. Almost 75 per cent surveyed believed that the government was not transparent and that it only served the self-interest of certain political and ethnic groups. A common response is that government is marred by bribery, favouritism and nepotism.

### **Governance**

- Sustained denial of constitutional and political rights under the pretext of the Kashmir conflict has led to a deep suspicion of the federal government and its treatment of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan.
- Participants in this research generally welcomed the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order 2009. Almost 82 per cent of those surveyed believe that it is a positive step. Almost 70 per cent of young people surveyed believe that it has given them their identity and, at least, a space where they can legislate on a range of local issues.

### **Sectarianism**

- The growth of sectarian tensions and violence is troubling. Young people believe that law and order in Gilgit-Baltistan will remain fragile unless the police are fully depoliticised and equipped with modern technology to combat the violence.
- Other suggestions made by young people to reduce tensions include serious and persistent efforts to cleanse the area of illegal weapons; steps to take on hate-mongers and to prevent violence sparking as the result of rumour and disinformation; and measures to revive the sports and music of Gilgit-Baltistan, which have historically played a role in keeping communities united.

## Education

- Young people expressed great concern over the lack of facilities and poor quality in government-run schools and colleges. They felt that the education sector is politicised, teachers are not appointed on merit and are not well trained. Many feel that the education sector does not appear to be the top priority of government and is underfunded.
- Views on the private education sector are much more positive, although young people were concerned that this was creating a two-tier system. The work of initiatives such as Aga Khan Educational Services in bringing education to rural and remote areas and in promoting education for girls was praised.
- There is a widespread demand of engineering and medical colleges for the youth of Gilgit-Baltistan. Many regretted that they had to leave for Islamabad, Rawalpindi or Lahore to continue their studies.

## Economic issues

- Young people of Gilgit-Baltistan are optimistic about the long-term future of the area given its economic and natural resources, although critical of their immediate employment prospects.

- There is a strong belief that the region can be economically self-sufficient. Indeed, young people believe that the region has the potential to change the economic fortune of the whole country.
- Slow economic development is attributed, in part, to a lack of political will and accountability. People argue that there are the natural resources but Gilgit-Baltistan lacks technology, trained human capital and connectivity across the region.
- Many want to see greater cross LoC linkages, not to deal necessarily with issues caused by the divide, but to boost trade and tourism and to open new avenues of economic prosperity and local development.
- There is widespread frustration that potential areas of revenue generation are not within the jurisdiction of the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly. Revenues from dams and electricity generation, duties on cross-border trade, tourist fees are managed and controlled in a non-transparent way by federal government.
- The work of community-based organisations and initiatives such as the Aga Khan Rural Support Program are seen as a positive development, particularly in empowering local communities and supporting grassroots economic development.

## Introduction

Situated in the northeast of Pakistan, Gilgit-Baltistan is part of a larger conflict between India and Pakistan over Jammu and Kashmir. As such, it has been a disputed territory between India and Pakistan since 1947. It occupies part of the territory of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, which is currently divided between Jammu, the Kashmir Valley and Ladakh on the Indian side and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) and Gilgit-Baltistan on the Pakistani side.

The political history of Gilgit-Baltistan is debated and contested. At the time of the partition of the Indian Subcontinent, Gilgit Agency was one of the territories within the former state of Jammu and Kashmir under the control of its ruler Maharaja Hari Singh (Schofield, 2003)<sup>1</sup>. There is a popular local narrative that it was the people of Gilgit-Baltistan who revolted against the maharaja, in reaction to his decision to accede to India, and decided to join Pakistan. However, according to (Mahmud, 2009)<sup>2</sup>, the wish of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan to accede to Pakistan has always been

discouraged by the Pakistani federal government due to Gilgit-Baltistan's integral link with the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Since its creation, Pakistan has never indicated Gilgit-Baltistan as part of its territory on its official maps and in its constitution.

Today, Gilgit-Baltistan is neither a province of Pakistan nor a formal part of Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), the successor to the former Jammu and Kashmir state in Pakistan's official narrative. It has an ambiguous position within the international territorial dispute and Pakistan's federal framework. Exclusion from the political process has created uncertainty about the future and has given birth to an identity crisis. Young people in Gilgit-Baltistan are arguably the worst victims of this ambiguous status, which many believe to be holding back the political and economic development of the area.

This research therefore seeks to explore the social, political and economic issues affecting the young people of Gilgit-Baltistan in the context of its undefined status and the conflict over Jammu and Kashmir. The paper also aims to highlight the largely unheard voices of young people of Gilgit-Baltistan, set out their aspirations for the future and assess their role as an agent of change.

1 Schofield, V. *Kashmir in Conflict: India, Pakistan and the Unending War* (New York: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2003)

2 Mahmud, E. *The Gilgit-Baltistan Reforms Package 2007; Background Phases and Analysis*. (Islamabad: Institute of Policies and Studies, 2009)

## Background and recent political history

Gilgit-Baltistan is a multilingual region with sociocultural and ethnic diversity. It is surrounded by three famous mountain ranges: the Himalayas, the Karakoram and the Hindu Kush. It occupies an area of 72,496 square kilometres<sup>3</sup>. According to the 1998 census, the population of Gilgit-Baltistan was 870,347; it is estimated it will have a population of 1,387,106 by 2015 (Imran Sikandar Baloch)<sup>4</sup>. The resident population includes four denominations of Islam – Shiites constitute 39 per cent, Sunnis 27 per cent, Ismaili 18 per cent, and Noorbakshi 16 per cent – and at least 24 ethnic and linguistic groups (Hunzai, 2013)<sup>5</sup>.

The mass uprising in AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan (1947–48) and the first India-Pakistan war over Kashmir resulted in the division of the former state of Jammu and Kashmir. In the official narrative of Pakistan, the AJK government is regarded as the successor administration to the rule of Maharaja Hari Singh. The AJK government was established with formal headquarters in Muzaffarabad and a president and cabinet.

In the Northern Areas<sup>6</sup>, the governance arrangements evolved on different lines. On 16 November 1947 the federal government of Pakistan sent its representative Muhammad Alam to Gilgit to run the local administration. Less than two years later, under the pretext of geographical and administrative constraints, the government of AJK was asked to handover formally the administrative and governance control of the Northern Areas, the territory which is now known as Gilgit-Baltistan. In April 1949, the government of AJK signed the Karachi Agreement<sup>7</sup> with the government of Pakistan. This agreement handed over the administrative and legal control of Gilgit-Baltistan to Pakistan, and also gave the federal government responsibility for defence and foreign policy of AJK and negotiation with United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan (UNCIP)<sup>8</sup> (Warikoo, 2009)<sup>9</sup>.

Following the Karachi Agreement, the political and administrative affairs of Gilgit-Baltistan were managed through the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR). AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan evolved as two distinct entities without having any formal official relationship. Gilgit and Baltistan along with Hunza and Nagar were amalgamated in 1970.

### 1974–2009: Journey towards democratic rule

The FCR<sup>10</sup> gave immense powers to the administration without any political accountability. This resulted in demands to the federal government to abolish the FCR and empower local people. In 1974, the prime minister of Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto abolished the FCR and introduced the Northern Areas Council Legal Framework Order 1974–75. This introduced some administrative and judicial reforms but did not provide fundamental rights for the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. In the late 1970s, Pakistan's military ruler General Zia-ul-Haq attempted to take selected members of the Northern Areas Legislative Council (NALC) to the Majlis-e-Shura (the body he had established in the absence of a parliament). This move received criticism from AJK's political leadership and other Kashmiri nationalist parties and was abandoned.<sup>11</sup>

In 1994, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) introduced the Northern Areas Legal Framework Order (LFO) 1994 (Ahmad, 2009)<sup>12</sup>. Under this order, all executive powers were vested with the Federal Minister for Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas as chief executive of NALC. The chief executive was empowered to amend the LFO at his will without seeking the approval of the Council. The chief executive was to be assisted by a deputy chief executive appointed by chief executive from the members of NALC; all other members of NALC were to advise the deputy chief executive. NALC was comprised of 24 elected members – six members each from Gilgit, Diamer and Baltistan and three each from Ghizar and Ghanche – together with five seats reserved for women, who were selected by the 24 elected members. The Federal Minister for Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas was also a

3 Gilgit-Baltistan Directorate of Education

4 Imran Sikandar Baloch, Secretary Planning and Development Gilgit-Baltistan. Population Projections (1998–2025).

5 Hunzai, I. Conflict Dynamics in Gilgit-Baltistan (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 2013)

6 Northern Areas is interchangeably used for Gilgit-Baltistan

7 The Karachi Agreement was signed on 28 April 1949. The signatories were Sardar Mohammed Ibrahim Khan, the president of AJK, Mushtaq Ahmed Gurmani, a minister without portfolio in the Pakistan government, and Choudhry Ghulam Abbas, a representative from the Muslim Conference.

8 The United Nations Commission for India and Pakistan was set up by the UN Security Council to oversee the holding of a plebiscite on Kashmir.

9 Warikoo, K. *Himalayan Frontiers of India: Historical, Geo-Political and Strategic Perspectives* (Routledge, 2009), p.73

10 The Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) comprises a special set of laws of Pakistan which are currently applicable to the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of northwestern Pakistan. The law states that three basic rights are not applicable to the residents of FATA: the right to request a change to a conviction in any court; the right to legal representation and the right to present reasoned evidence, respectively.

11 Nationalist parties believe in the unity of former state of Jammu and Kashmir and regarded this move as threatening its potential future as an independent state.

12 Ahmad, I. 'Empowering Northern Areas without Jeopardizing Kashmir', *Weekly Pulse* (September 2009)

member of the council. No bill could be passed or become law unless it was approved and signed by chief executive<sup>13</sup>.

In the wake of Pakistan's Supreme Court decision in 1999 directing Islamabad to extend fundamental freedoms to the Northern Areas within six months, coupled with political pressure within Gilgit-Baltistan, the government of Pakistan delegated further administrative and financial powers to NALC. Separate divisions for Gilgit-Baltistan and AJK were created. The deputy chief executive was given some limited powers in respect of postings and transfers of government servants up to a certain grade. It was decided that the chief secretary of Gilgit-Baltistan would be treated on a par with the chief secretaries of other provinces of Pakistan.

In the 2007 reform package, the Northern Areas Legislative Council was upgraded and made a Legislative Assembly, and the deputy chief executive was made its chief executive. The Minister for Kashmir Affairs became the chairman of the new Legislative Assembly (*The News*, 2007)<sup>14</sup>. The reforms also provided for the transfer of administrative and financial powers to the Northern Areas from the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas (Hong, 2012)<sup>15</sup>.

### **Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order 2009**

In August 2009, the PPP-led federal government introduced the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order 2009. It was a significant step in compliance with the 1999 Supreme Court verdict directing the government to take all necessary measures to grant fundamental rights to the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. Changing the name of the area from Northern Areas to Gilgit-Baltistan, the presidential order created new offices of governor and chief minister. Gilgit-Baltistan was entitled to have its own public service commission (PSC), a chief election commissioner (CEC) and an auditor general.

It developed the roles and functions of two pivotal institutions already in existence, the Legislative Assembly and the Gilgit-Baltistan Council. The new Legislative Assembly would comprise 33 members: 24 members elected directly on the basis of adult franchise; six women members elected in the manner used for reserved seats in Pakistan; three seats for technocrats and professional members similarly elected in the system used for reserved

seats. The assembly is empowered to elect the chief minister, speaker and deputy speaker. In the fourth schedule of the presidential order, a total of 61 subjects were placed under the jurisdiction of the assembly. The Gilgit-Baltistan Consolidated Fund and the annual budget were to be presented to the assembly and voted upon, replicating the practice in other provinces in the country.

The Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order established an upper house, the Gilgit-Baltistan Council. This is to consist of 15 members with the prime minister of Pakistan as its ex-officio chairperson. Other members include the governor (as its vice-chairman), six federal ministers and members of parliament nominated by the prime minister of Pakistan, the chief minister of Gilgit-Baltistan and six other members to be elected by the Gilgit-Baltistan Legislative Assembly in accordance with a system of proportional representation. The federal minister for Kashmir Affairs and Gilgit-Baltistan attends the council as an ex officio non-voting member. The council could legislate on 55 subjects given in the third schedule of the presidential order.

The Gilgit-Baltistan Council would oversee the appointments on constitutional positions like governor, chief court judges, auditor general, chief election commissioner and chairman of the public service commission. However, the governor shall be appointed by the president of Pakistan on advice of the prime minister of Pakistan.

The elected Legislative Assembly is now functional but all major decisions are still effectively taken by the federal government in Islamabad through the mechanism of the Gilgit-Baltistan Council. According to Gillani<sup>16</sup>, the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order 2009 is very similar to the AJK Interim Constitution Act of 1974 and both offer the respective territories less autonomy in practical terms than that granted to the provinces of Pakistan.

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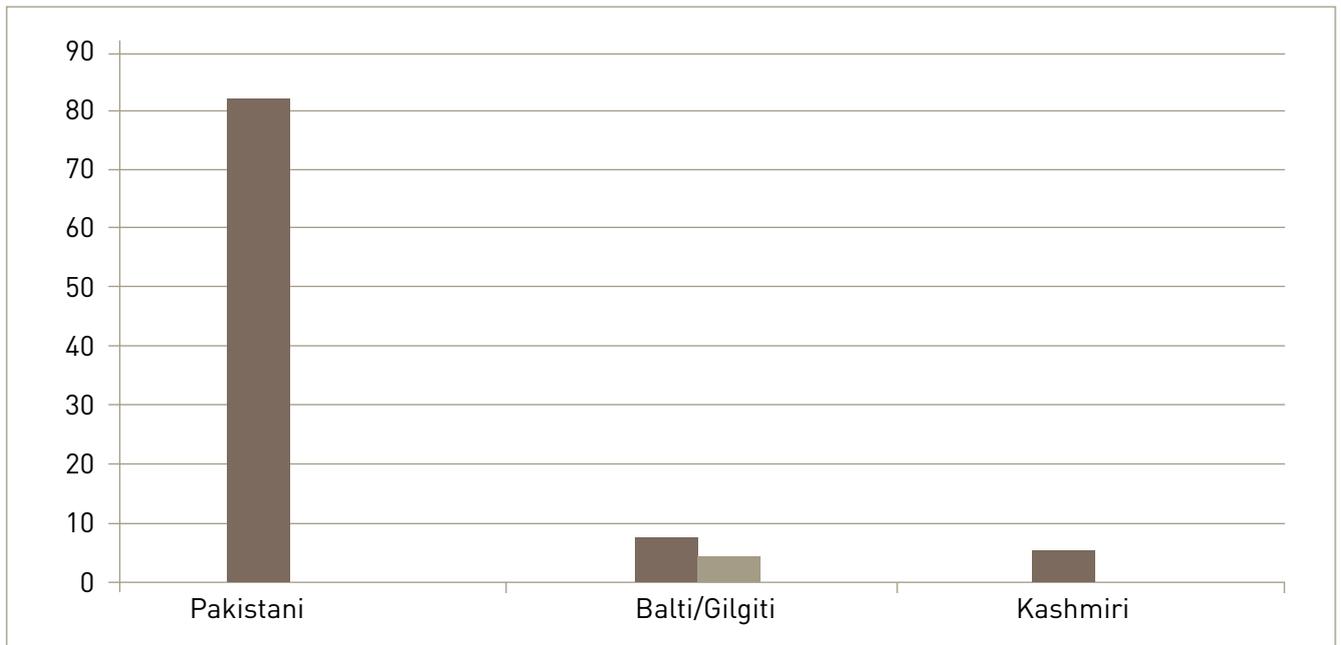
13 Text of the Northern Areas Legal Framework Order (LFO) of 1994.

14 *The News 'Package for Northern Areas' (2007, 25 October)*

15 Hong, C. *Liminality and Resistance in Gilgit-Baltistan*. (Canada: Centre for International Sustainable Development Law McGill University, 2012)

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16 Gillani, S. M. *Proposed Constitutional Amendments in the Constitution of Islamic Republic of Pakistan 1973, for Empowerment of Azad Jammu & Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan* (Islamabad: PILDAT discussion paper, 2011)



**Chart 1:** What would you prefer to call yourself?

## Methodology

To explore and identify key issues confronting the youth of Gilgit-Baltistan, a participatory action research approach was adopted. The aim was to get both qualitative and quantitative data that would identify and understand young people's views on socioeconomic issues, political rights, education and governance, and would gather suggestions from participants about ways to address their uncertain future.

The research design and instruments – discussion groups and a questionnaire survey – were developed in consultation with a wide range of experts including academics, researchers, conflict resolution experts and political figures. A team of five members from Gilgit-Baltistan were trained in conducting focus group discussions (FGDs), conflict analysis and field surveys.

Six day-long FGDs were conducted in Gilgit-Baltistan, split between both divisions (that is, Gilgit division and Baltistan division). As a large number of young people from Gilgit-Baltistan are at university in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, two additional FGDs were conducted with the youth of Gilgit-Baltistan settled in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. The questionnaire was designed so that it could be administered using different survey methods (online and in person). FGDs and structured interviews were carried out between April 2012 and 28 June 2013.

### Participants

Young people of Gilgit-Baltistan – those aged between 18 to 35 years as of July 2012 – were

selected to participate in the data collection process. Participants were selected to ensure that all districts of Gilgit-Baltistan were represented. A non-probability quota sampling approach was adopted<sup>17</sup> and participants were chosen according to their backgrounds (rural or urban), education, profession and identification with particular political parties.

Almost 150 young people from both the divisions of Gilgit-Baltistan from various socio-political and ethnic backgrounds participated in the FGDs. Participants included youth leaders, students, young lawyers, journalists, civil society activists and religious figures. There was a 20:80 ratio of female to male participation in FGDs.

Research questionnaires were also sent to 350 individuals across Gilgit-Baltistan, and just under 300 were completed and returned. Twenty five face-to-face interviews were also conducted from youth representing political parties, social sector, academia and civil society.

In total, 425 young people participated in the research. Almost 30 per cent of the participants were women.

<sup>17</sup> Non-probability quota sampling does not give all the individuals in the population equal chances of being selected; instead people are selected according to a fixed quota on the basis of pre-specified characteristics so that the total sample has the same distribution of characteristics assumed to exist in the population being studied.

## Questions of identity

It is a hard reality that no question causes more displeasure and resentment in Gilgit-Baltistan than that of associating or linking their political identity with Kashmir. Young people generally prefer to associate themselves with the larger political and constitutional structure of Pakistan. Almost 82 per cent of the youth surveyed in this research prefer to call themselves Pakistanis and disassociate themselves from the larger Kashmiri identity.

Young people believe that after the liberation of Gilgit-Baltistan, the people of Gilgit Agency, Hunza and Nagar (former states) signed an instrument of accession with Pakistan on 18 November 1947. One young person from Gilgit remarked: “My forefathers have liberated this territory themselves and willfully decided to join Pakistan. How come I have been denied the basic rights.” A young man from Nagar commented that even the British had stated in 1941 that Hunza and Nagar were *under* the suzerainty of the Kashmir state, and *were not part of it*, nor were Chilas, Koh Ghizar, Ishkoman and Yasin.

### Desire for provincial status

Most people interviewed for this research wanted to see Gilgit-Baltistan as the fifth province of Pakistan. Due to its historical links to the Kashmir conflict and Pakistan’s commitment at international forums such as the United Nations Security Council, Pakistan has clearly denied this status to Gilgit-Baltistan. One person remarked: “We have a unanimous demand of declaring Gilgit-Baltistan

as the fifth province of Pakistan by amending the constitution of Pakistan.” Almost 80 percent of the youth want to see it as the fifth province of Pakistan and disassociated from Kashmir. They believe they should be heard and they should be accepted. “Why we are not owned as Pakistanis?” said a youth from Yasin during a FGD.

During FGDs, young people complained that their identity is totally confused. The undefined status of the region hurts them both psychologically as well as politically. Legally and constitutionally, Gilgit-Baltistan is not part of Pakistan and hence its population cannot automatically claim the full rights and privileges enjoyed by Pakistani citizens. Those referring to the accession of the area to Pakistan in 1947 get flattened by the fact that officially Pakistan does not formally consider Gilgit-Baltistan as part of the country. Indeed, the federal government could not table the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order 2009 before the parliament for approval since Gilgit-Baltistan is out of its purview.

### Counter-narrative

It is important to recognise the different voices on this subject. Some young people, specifically those belonging to nationalist parties believe that conferring a quasi-province status to Gilgit-Baltistan would compromise the Kashmir conflict and undermine organic unity of the former state of Jammu and Kashmir. (The Kashmiri leadership living across the Line of Control (LoC) opposes

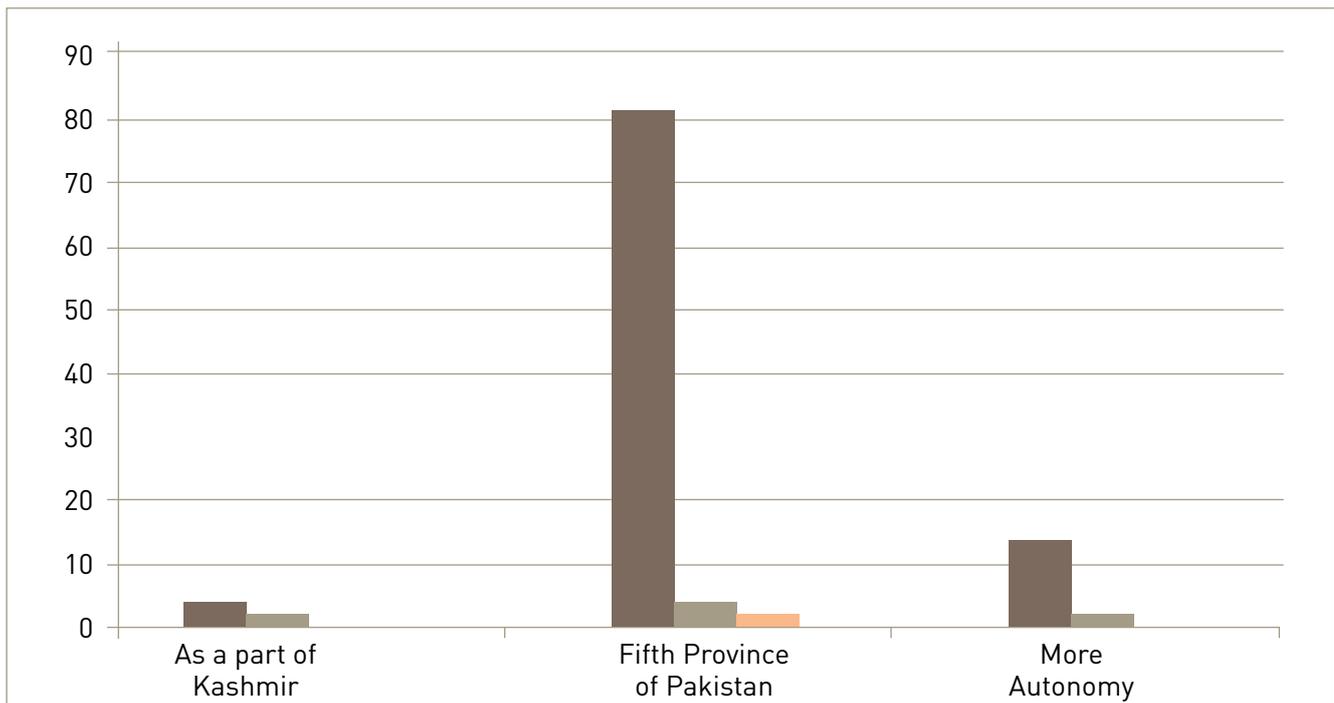


Chart 2: How do you see your future?

provincial status to the region. They are also of the view that it would negatively affect Jammu and Kashmir's territorial unity.)

These young people oppose the most recent political settlement (the 2009 Order) and believe that there are inherent contradictions when it comes to defining the status to Gilgit-Baltistan. One remarked: "This is Presidential Order in the form of an ordinance that does not enjoy the sanctity of a parliamentary act." From a legal point of view, the National Assembly of Pakistan has no power to approve or give sanctity to this order since Gilgit-Baltistan does not fall under its jurisdiction. Yet according to the constitution of Pakistan, ordinances issued by president have to be presented before the parliament for approval with 120 days of their issuance. Given these complications, the youth with nationalistic tendencies declare the reform packages introduced by successive dispensations in Islamabad as ultra-constitutional, and a clear departure from the United Nations resolutions on Jammu and Kashmir, and claim they offer no legal and constitutional binding on future governments.

The Kashmiri nationalists believe that there is deeper ambiguity in defining the status of Gilgit-Baltistan. They claim that history is replete with instances of the 'association' and 'disassociation' of Gilgit-Baltistan with the state of Pakistan. For example, they argue the Karachi Agreement was an attempt to associate Gilgit-Baltistan within the larger Pakistani political umbrella. The association is further deepened when the federal government declined the AJK legislative assembly's resolution reclaiming Gilgit-Baltistan in 1972. One FGD participant stated that Zia-ul-Haq extended martial law to Gilgit-Baltistan in 1977 in Pakistan, unlike in AJK, as an endeavor to consolidate de-facto control of Gilgit-Baltistan. Similarly, the annulment of State Subject Rule (SSR)<sup>18</sup> in Gilgit-Baltistan is seen as another attempt of 'association'.

However, disassociation – or what some call 'alienation' – is also deeply rooted. This is evident in the absence of Gilgit-Baltistan in the constitution of Pakistan. It is noted that any step to change this situation would compromise the official stance of Pakistan on the Kashmir conflict (that the territory should have the right of self-determination) as it has always considered Gilgit-Baltistan as a part of the disputed territory at international forums like the United Nations (UN). To fulfil its international commitments, the Pakistan federal government

may not be in a position to declare Gilgit-Baltistan a province till the final settlement of the Kashmir conflict.

Where there appears to be a convergence of the conflicting narratives on the status of Gilgit-Baltistan is in regard to its political representation at federal level. This appears to be a core concern of young people across the board, and they believe that they can be given a setup like AJK without compromising the official status of Pakistan. There is a misconception that the AJK governance setup is autonomous like other provinces of Pakistan, which in fact may not hold true. However, even young people believing in the unity of the former state of Jammu and Kashmir have the same demands of rights and representation at federal level, and they believe that the leadership of AJK has opposed every development of political rights for Gilgit-Baltistan without realising the sufferings and plight of its people.

### Relationship with Azad Jammu and Kashmir

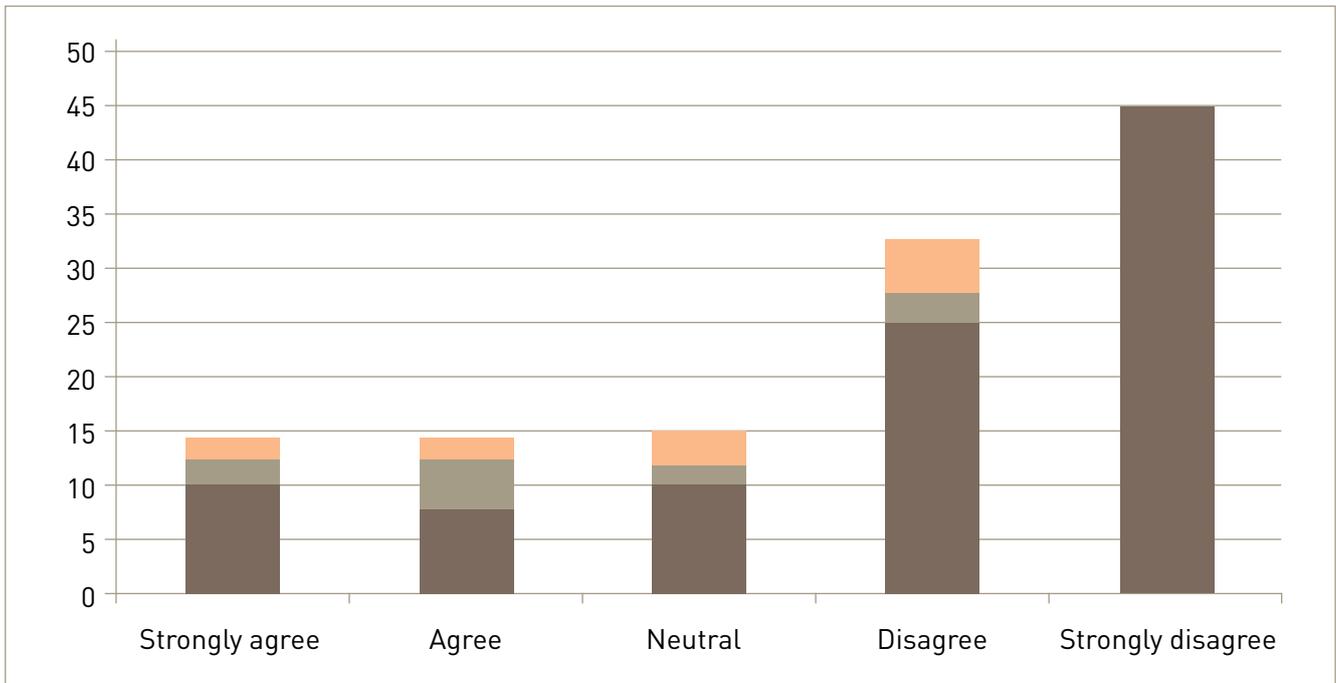
Exploring the relationship with AJK is very complex and intriguing given the historical context. Young people of Gilgit-Baltistan believe that AJK is far more prosperous and autonomous, with its own functioning assembly and independent institutions. Young people, while mostly unaware of its structure and functioning, refer to the AJK political setup as a model of internal autonomy and self-rule, though do not want to see any political association.

Discussion of the relationship of AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan brings out sharp criticism from young people. Most participants in the research lamented that the AJK leadership remains a key obstacle when it comes to granting them political rights. One remarked that the leadership of AJK had signed the Karachi Agreement without the consent of, and representation from, the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. Many blamed the AJK leadership for their current poor socioeconomic and constitutional plight. "We were denied basic rights, fell short in sociopolitical development, and the AJK leadership has never paid any attention, but whenever there appeared a positive development for the empowerment of people of Gilgit-Baltistan, they resisted and opposed," one of the youth remarked.

On the question of a resumption of sustained engagement with AJK, most of the young people surveyed believe that there is a huge trust deficit between the people on both sides, and this is mainly due to lack of any communication channels. One person from Skardu said: "We have been kept far and away deliberately and this hatred against each other is systematic and structured."

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18 State Subject Rule was a law passed by the Maharaja of Kashmir defining a 'hereditary state subject' and forbidding the employment of non-state subjects in the public services; they were also not allowed to purchase land in the former state of Jammu and Kashmir.



**Chart 3:** *You are satisfied with the present political system in Gilgit-Baltistan*

Many underlined the need to reopen the centuries old road link between the two territories to help nurture a relationship based on mutual trust and respect and to explore where the two territories could cooperate on a shared agenda. Certainly those who believe in the integrity of former state are dumbfounded by the fact that Gilgit-Baltistan has no road link with AJK at the moment. Construction of the Astore-Neelum valley road via the Shountar pass<sup>19</sup> will be an alternative of Karakoram Highway route that would reduce distance between Gilgit and Islamabad by 8 to 10 hours and bring the people of Gilgit-Baltistan and AJK closer.

Participants in the research also argued that the people of AJK and Gilgit-Baltistan should launch a joint struggle for their common socioeconomic and political rights. For example, the real power in both Gilgit-Baltistan and AJK lies with their respective

<sup>19</sup> From Kel Neelum valley in AJK, a way leads into Gilgit-Baltistan via the Shountar pass.

councils, which are chaired by the prime minister of Pakistan as its chairperson and are not directly answerable to local people. Youth believe that a joint movement could force the federal government to concede to their legitimate demands. Other ideas include a proposal that youth forums and councils be established to ensure regular and frequent interaction. Besides forging people-to-people contacts, these would help youth to explore different options jointly.

Cultural exchange programmes, sports activities and allocation of job and admission quotas on a reciprocal basis can go a long way to improve relations between Gilgit-Baltistan and AJK. The enhanced communication channels and institutional linkages between these two regions can reduce the trust deficit and create opportunities for socioeconomic and political development. If the present state of affairs is allowed to prolong, it will only lead to more indifference and coldness between the two sides.

## Governance

Sustained denial of constitutional and political rights under the pretext of the Kashmir conflict has led to a deep suspicion of the federal government and its treatment of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan. Participants in the FGDs believe that their narrative of identity is not being heard and given due importance in larger Pakistani political discourse. They believe they are kept in constitutional limbo, denied of basic rights just under the pretext of

Jammu and Kashmir conflict. There is a democratic deficit and they feel vulnerable and excluded from decision making and from mainstream politics in Pakistan.

They contend that the lack of constitutional status impedes Gilgit-Baltistan's ability to obtain a fair share of the financial benefits from its natural resources since they are unable to effectively

lobby in the federal government. More generally, they believe that human development suffers without defined identity, recognition and autonomy, which can strengthen the institutional and social relationships of people within society. In the case of Gilgit-Baltistan, it is missing.

### How young people view the current set-up

However, despite general dissatisfaction with the political system, participants in the study in general lauded the Gilgit-Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order 2009. Almost 82 per cent of the youth surveyed believe that this order is a positive step for empowering Gilgit-Baltistan and they support it. Many believe it can help engender a new culture characterised by accountability, ownership and collectivism. Almost 70 per cent of young people surveyed believe that this Order has given them their identity. One young person from Ghizer noted: "I know this is a lame duck system, where all powers rest with the chairman of the Gilgit-Baltistan Council, but it has given me identity and status." Others believe it has provided them with a space where they can at least legislate on a range of local issues. Judicial reforms under the new arrangement also bode well.

There were some concerns that there should have been a consultative process by the federal government before promulgation of the Order. "Without giving even a scent of it to anyone, including the Legislative Assembly, the federal government imposed it unilaterally." A political activist from Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PMLN) said that the Order should have been debated first at relevant forums to bring everyone on board, and the fact that no such exercise was initiated reflected a colonial mindset. He added that such unilateral actions only breed alienation and suspicion rather than building the bridges of mutual trust and closeness. However, he believed that the continued peaceful struggle for democratic governance had yielded some results and the process of giving Gilgit-Baltistan the internal autonomy enjoyed by other provinces had begun.

Others are similarly optimistic, believing that the Order might usher a new era of empowerment and self-rule and should be seen as a fresh start for better governance and political advancement. They feel it can pave the way for integration of Gilgit-Baltistan with the rest of Pakistan. A youth from Hunza voiced this aspiration: "This should be taken as the start of a journey, which should end on the provincial setup where we must be given equal rights and representation in the National Assembly and Senate of Pakistan."

### Democratic deficit

On the other hand, many have deeper concerns about the democratic spirit of the Order. They believe that the Order lacks democratic principles. Young people across the board sharply criticise the role and functions of the Gilgit-Baltistan Council and believe it to be a supra-constitutional body. Though the Order claims to empower and strengthen the Legislative Assembly, it puts the most important subjects under the control of the Gilgit-Baltistan Council, where the role of Legislative Assembly is non-existent. Under the 2009 Order, the Council is given sweeping constitutional, financial and administrative powers. There are virtually no checks and balances on its powers over 55 subjects, including most of the financially valuable sectors such as tourism, forestry, minerals and mineral wealth, and many vital policy areas such as economic planning, development of industries, electricity supply and bulk water storage.

The young people surveyed in this study criticised the non-representative character of the Gilgit-Baltistan Council. It is effectively under the control of federal government; eight of the 15 members are not elected by the people of Gilgit-Baltistan and, of these, seven are specifically nominated by the prime minister of Pakistan. It entrusts extensive powers to the chairman of the Council (the prime minister of Pakistan), who has "power to grant pardons, reprieves and respites and to remit, suspend or commute any sentence passed by any court, tribunal or other authority". Young people were of the view that the Council exercises paramount authority over the Legislative Assembly and clipped its space for decision making. The system has further strengthened the role of bureaucracy since the chief secretary in the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs is a federal bureaucrat and the governor, a political appointee.

It has also failed to give political status and representation at the national level of Pakistan. For example, it does not allow people to elect representatives for the National Assembly or the Senate of Pakistan. "We don't have representation on the National Finance Commission (NFC)<sup>20</sup> which is denial of our rights," claimed one of the workers of PML (N) from Diامر district.

Although the order establishes a Supreme Appellate Court for Gilgit-Baltistan, it also holds that cases are not appealable to the highest court of Pakistan. The chief judge of the Supreme Appellate Court is appointed by the chairman of the Gilgit-

<sup>20</sup> The National Finance Commission consists of the Minister of Finance of the Federal government, the Ministers of Finance of the provincial governments and other persons as may be appointed by the President after consultation with the governors of the provinces for distribution of finance to the provinces.

Baltistan Council on the advice of the governor. The other five judges are to be appointed by the chairman on the advice of the governor after seeking views of the chief judge. The auditor general of Gilgit-Baltistan is appointed by the governor on the advice of Council as the case in AJK.

Overall, the young people of Gilgit-Baltistan consider the Order as an incremental step to empower people although it falls far short of their aspirations. They believe that there is a need to constructively engage with the federal government to build and create mechanisms that deliver inclusive policies, and ensure equal share in representation and resource sharing.

### **Views on local politics and political engagement**

Most participants in the research believed that the current governance structure is antithetical to the ideals of good governance and representative democracy. There is a widespread perception that the existing political leadership lacks capacity to ensure good governance. Young people are not satisfied with the performance of their elected representatives. One person from Astore district complained: "The current government is very poor on the legislation front and its focus is on perks and privileges and our chief minister is powerless." Young people believe that the current government has failed in delivering basic services to the public.

There is deep concern and disappointment over the corrupt practices of government departments. Bribery, favouritism and nepotism have marred the character of political government. Almost 75 per cent surveyed believed that the government was not transparent and that it only served the self-interest of certain political and ethnic groups. Civil society is an evolving process and is less resilient in challenging the government on governance issues.

Young people also accept that blaming federal government for all ills has become a fashion and ignores the incompetence of local leadership. Though the Council enjoys unfettered power over the major administrative and constitutional affairs of Gilgit-Baltistan, young people question the progress made on those subjects which are in the jurisdiction of Legislative Assembly. They believe that political incompetence has generated space for the bureaucracy to steer their affairs. Most of the political leadership of Gilgit-Baltistan has made no major contribution to development except in corruption, said a youth from Gilgit.

Political parties do not have strong organisational setups. They are considered as puppet political parties. Their decision making structures are

inefficient. Young people believe that political parties are unable to claim and contest for rights. "We vote for Khandans (clans) and families," said a young person during a FGD. Most young people believe that there is a dire need for local governance setup, which is autonomous and ensures effective mechanisms of accountability. The issue of subsidies for dams was raised as an example of local political failure. Federal government is constructing dams and enacting a policy of divide and rule.

Young people commented on the role of the mainstream electronic media in Pakistan, which has given 24/7 coverage of local elections for the first time. This has given the cause of Gilgit-Baltistan national prominence. Federal political parties in the recent elections made a very positive impact in highlighting issues of Gilgit-Baltistan. Some, however, showed resentment to the mainstream political parties for marring the basic identity of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Another political development commented on by young people was the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). In Gilgit-Baltistan the space left by the constitutional ambiguity has been seized to some extent by NGOs and by the clergy. NGOs have a role to build social cohesion in a very impartial way, but this contributed to creating the notion of apolitical or political impartiality that impacts on youth's participation in political affairs of Gilgit-Baltistan. Though young people of Gilgit-Baltistan believe in political process and democratic ideals, this narrative of political impartiality will take time to diminish.

In general, young people of Gilgit-Baltistan, irrespective of their grievances, have a deep interest in politics. They acknowledge the fact that the new political process, despite many drawbacks, has created opportunities for participation. They are engaged in a range of different activities which are concerned with politics. It has become evident in the FGDs that young people have a slightly narrow conception of what constitutes political participation and they were sometimes unlikely to perceive their actions as political.

Politics is conceptualised in a limited and narrow way. They perceived the subject as boring and irrelevant to their lives at present. Despite their narrow understanding of politics, they want to be involved in the existing political process and desire that they should be given space in existing political structures. "There is a perceived lack of opportunity for young people to become involved in formal politics," said a youth from Baltistan during a FGD.

## Sectarianism

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Gilgit-Baltistan is home to three major communities: Shias, Sunnis and Ismailis. Skardu is a predominantly Shia population division, while Sunnis and Ismailis are concentrated in Diamir and Hunza respectively. The three communities, with deep religious differences, lived in peace and harmony until late 1970s when schisms started to appear between Shias and Sunnis. Ismailis were also looked at askance because of their faith and the worldview.

The first sectarian clash in Gilgit-Baltistan was in 1975 when a Shia Muharrum procession in Gilgit town was fired at from a Sunni mosque. Violence spread to many other areas when the Sunni cleric was taken into custody for inciting people. The next major clash took place in 1988 triggered by a dispute over the sighting of the moon to mark end of the month-long fasting of Ramadan and start of Eid festivities. Based on the declaration of the sighting of the moon by their religious leaders, the Shia community ended fasting and started celebrations while the Sunni community was still fasting. The disagreement was significant because Muslims are forbidden to fast on the day of Eid. Tensions rose quickly and resulted in violent clashes in Gilgit, in which two people died and several others were injured.

Sectarianism has since unfortunately become common place in Gilgit-Baltistan with innocent people falling victims to it routinely. The killing of foreign mountaineers in 2014 was perhaps the worst incident, as it demonstrated that sectarian violence in the area had now turned into a general law and order situation and safety of even foreigners could no longer be guaranteed.

Young people claimed that the situation has reached such a stage where people now look at things from the prism of sectarianism and perceive everyone as problematic who does not adhere to their school of thought. Shia and Sunni are living in separate towns and areas, which reaffirms that social cohesion and integration between them is a distant dream now. Youth referred to the social setup as akin to apartheid Africa to highlight the gravity of the situation in Gilgit-Baltistan.

### Young people's concerns

Youth have taken a very strong exception to this state of affairs, and fear that things may take an even more nasty turn if corrective steps are not taken immediately by the authorities. During FGDs held in both Gilgit and Skardu divisions, participants held a number of domestic and international factors responsible for this situation.

For example, some assert that the unresolved status of Gilgit-Baltistan and the absence of a democratic politics has resulted in myriad socioeconomic and political problems. Sectarianism is just one manifestation. They claim that the limited space for political activism aggravates laden disputes and conflicts, which eventually result in bloodshed. To them, Gilgit-Baltistan is passing through this phase at the moment. Young people believe that sectarian issues are aggravated due to the absence of a democratic system. According to Brown et al (1997)<sup>21</sup> the ethnic violence occurs for a number of reasons including but not limited to disenfranchisement with the current system, economic strife or general state weakness as well as failures in consolidation and exclusion from the power structure.

Another reason given by young people is the closer links with Pakistan. They say that the Karakorum Highway (KKH), which links Gilgit-Baltistan directly with 'mainland' Pakistan, has exposed the area to the hatred and intolerant attitudes which unfortunately have over a period of time become a hallmark of Pakistani state and society. With inadequate safety measures in place, the highway has triggered the influx of illegal weapons, drugs and intolerant attitudes from the south, and it has changed the demographics of Gilgit and other towns. It has also facilitated attacks, such as that by religious militia in 1988 which entered Gilgit-Baltistan to avenge the alleged killings of Sunnis at the hands of Shias. This led to the massacring of more than 400 Shia community members and the burning down of entire Shia villages.

Changing demographics is causing tension. Many believe that the roots of this sectarian mindset lie in the decision to abolish the SSR, which paved the way for outsiders to settle in Gilgit-Baltistan. They were, in majority cases, the adherents of Sunni Islam, which was perceived by locals as a concerted move to change the demographics of the area. Shias strongly believe that their numerical majority in Gilgit-Baltistan has been continuously diluted by the influx of Sunni ethnic Pathans and Punjabis. Some even retain a lingering sense that their existence is threatened and that because the state has failed to protect them they have every right to defend their community, faith and way of life any way that they can.

Several young people also pointed out that the Sunni community feels marginalised, both politically and economically, at the hands of Shia-

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21 Brown, M E., Coté, O.E. Jr., Lynn-Jones, S.M. and Miller, S.E (eds) *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997)



*Young journalists from Gilgit-Baltistan sharing their views on the Self Governance Order 2009 during FGD held in Gilgit city (2013). © CPDR*

majority government in Gilgit-Baltistan. The Sunnis point out that because the Gilgit-Baltistan government has remained in the hands of the Shias, they are treated as second-class citizens, and are themselves victims of sectarian violence. They complain that they have little or no representation in the government, which now enjoys more powers and greater resources following the 2009 Order. They argue that much of the development funds are channelled to Shia-majority valleys and that Sunnis are excluded from key positions and employment opportunities, both in government and in the private sector.

Young people are also particularly concerned about the safety and security of the Ismaili community in Gilgit-Baltistan. They say that the community is known for its neutrality and peaceful outlook, which focuses all its attention on socioeconomic development and education. However, there are certain elements who openly accuse them of being complicit with the West, taking donor money and quietly promoting their interests while the rest of Gilgit-Baltistan is burning. The Ismailis maintain that they are misunderstood and, as their track record shows, they believe in sharing the fruits of development with other communities. However, there is a fear that even a small incident might incite hardliners to target this community. The youth believe that this would only widen the schism which is already tearing the society apart.

### **Possible ways to defuse tensions**

Young people believe that law and order in Gilgit-Baltistan will remain fragile unless the police are fully depoliticised and equipped with modern technology and weapons to deal with miscreants. Gilgit-Baltistan, they point out, is brimming with illegal weapons with many professional gun runners. Serious and persistent efforts to cleanse the area of illegal weapons and to cut off supply lines are vital to building public confidence. Gun trafficking can be checked through better monitoring of the only two access roads, the Karakoram Highway and the Gilgit-Chitral road.

Though a very tough call for obvious reasons, the government has to take a decisive step to take on the hatemongers. As evidence suggests, sectarian violence in Gilgit-Baltistan is often triggered by random events, such as an inflammatory speech by a visiting cleric, a malicious mobile text message, or a murder unrelated to sectarianism. Much of this violence can be prevented by better intelligence, more public awareness and communication campaigns, and efficient investigations. At present, the government has no preventive measures or protocols in place either to counter the disinformation extremists use to create mayhem or to inform citizens about the causes of random events before trouble flares up and takes a sectarian dimension. Khateeb and imams must be forced to deliver only a preapproved Friday

sermon. This would curb a big factor in the growth of communal violence in Gilgit-Baltistan.

Lastly, the government needs to take effective measures to revive the dying culture of sports and

music of Gilgit-Baltistan. These have historically played a vital role in keeping various communities united. The Silk Route and the Shandur festivals need to be revived in their original shape when they served as a real binding force among various communities.

## Education

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Education is considered as the most powerful and effective tool to bring about socioeconomic and political development in a country. Nelson Mandela once very aptly remarked: "A good head and good heart are always a formidable combination. But when you add to that a literate tongue or pen, then you have something very special." Education is one of the key issues that concern the young people of Gilgit-Baltistan.

Like elsewhere in Pakistan, the education system in Gilgit-Baltistan is based on unequal lines. There are differences between the public and private sectors. This creates a disparity, dividing people into two segments. Regional disparity is also an issue. The schools in more remote areas of Gilgit-Baltistan are not as good as those in central areas. There are 2,189 schools in Gilgit-Baltistan, out of which 419 are in the private sector, with an enrolment of 68,392 students and 2,758 teachers. Of the 419 private institutions, 312 are located in the Gilgit region while 107 are in the Baltistan region<sup>22</sup>. A fairly large number of religious seminaries have also absorbed a sizeable number of students. However, these seminaries impart sect-oriented education, which, according to research participants, does not allow them to easily integrate with society in the long run.

### Quality issues

Young people believe that private education institutions have given a new ray of hope to the younger generation. Almost 40 per cent students are enrolled in a private education system in the rural areas of Gilgit-Baltistan<sup>23</sup>. People believe the private education system ensures quality education. Almost 53 per cent of children enrolled in class 5 in private schools were able to read at least a story in Urdu as compared to 50 per cent of class 5 children enrolled in government schools. On English learning levels, children of private schools were better than public schools as 62 per cent of private school children can read at least sentences in class 5 whereas only 57 per cent of government school children can do the same.

By contrast, youth in Gilgit-Baltistan are deeply concerned about the state of public education in the region. One youth from Ghizer stated: "Our education system is outdated, and quality is declining day by day." There is a perception that the standard of public schools is declining. One issue is the quality of teaching. Out of a total of 10,057 teachers in government schools, there are only 904 Masters degree holders, 4,042 with a first degree, 2,482 are FA/ICS/ FsC and 1,718 are only matriculate<sup>24</sup>. Not a single teacher has a MPhil or PhD.

There is a perception of an acute shortage of competent teachers. Young people believe that the government-run educational system is deeply politicised. Teachers are hired on the basis of political affiliations, and most of them are incompetent. There is a popular discourse of 'rent a teacher'. During FGDs, participants claimed that most female teachers belong to influential families and generally hire an under-matric or matric educated female to teach on their behalf, who receives a minimal payment from the actual teacher.

As well as concerns about teacher competence, there are concerns with teacher-student ratios. During FGDs, young people stated that teacher absenteeism and high dropout rates, particularly at primary level, are the most pressing issues in some of the remote districts. This issue goes unabated since there are extremely poor mechanisms of transparency and accountability.

This is impacting on the quality of education. Only 27 per cent of class 3 children can read class 2 level sentences, while 20 per cent of children enrolled in class 1 cannot even read capital letters. Only 50 per cent of children enrolled in class 5 can do two-digit division while 31 per cent of class 7 children cannot do two-digit division<sup>25</sup>.

### Infrastructure and access

Surveys reveal that a vast majority of public sector educational institutions in Gilgit-Baltistan are in bad condition. Young people complained that most of the educational institutions do not have

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22 Gilgit-Baltistan Education Statistics 2011–12. Directorate of Education, Gilgit-Baltistan

23 Annual Status of Education Report, ASER–Pakistan 2013

24 Gilgit-Baltistan Education Statistics 2011–12. Directorate of Education, Gilgit-Baltistan

25 Annual Status of Education Report, ASER–Pakistan 2013

basic facilities such as a boundary wall, toilets, drinking water, study desks and so forth. Almost 1,044 schools have no electricity, 954 schools lack drinking water and most amazingly 913 schools have no latrine facility<sup>26</sup>. Out of these 913, 38 per cent are girls' schools. A further 1,032 schools have no boundary walls, of which 40 per cent are girls' schools. Another serious issue is the public schools' building conditions as only 289 schools have satisfactory buildings in the entire region and 793 buildings need serious attention and immediate repair. Availability of classrooms is another issue; there are 531 schools which have less than three classrooms for students.

Young people maintained that poor infrastructure is discouraging parents from sending their children to school. The situation, they emphasised, is worse for girl students, whose parents are less likely to let them continue their education in circumstances when security and safety is compromised or where there are transportation problems.

Pakistan is internationally committed to ensure that every child has access to school by 2015 through its Millennium Development Goals. During FGDs, young people shared that many children are out of schools. Official figures show almost 16 per cent of children of Gilgit-Baltistan are out of schools<sup>27</sup>.

### Further and higher education

Although young people of Gilgit-Baltistan are wary of associating themselves with AJK, during FGDs most of them drew comparison and equated their educational situation with AJK. One participant from Heramosh stated that AJK has three medical colleges, one engineering university and two other universities but despite promises Gilgit-Baltistan has neither a medical nor an engineering college. "Our deserving students do not get a chance to study medicine or engineering in Gilgit-Baltistan and they face many issues and problems while travelling outside the region. Most of them cannot afford to study outside the region and are unable to bear travel, boarding and lodging cost," he added. Young people during FGDs at Gilgit stated that they face problems settling down in big cities like Islamabad, Lahore and Rawalpindi for higher education. Participants also underlined that Gilgit-Baltistan students seldom are able to obtain admissions to top educational institutions in the country on open merit, thanks to poor education standards back home. There is a limited admission quota fixed for them, which is more often than not availed by those already studying in prestigious schools elsewhere.

### Role of Aga Khan Educational Services

Both NGO-led educational institutions and seminaries are working with complete freedom in Gilgit-Baltistan with no official checks. The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) is the second largest educational provider through Aga Khan Educational Services (AKES), which supplements the efforts of the government by providing educational opportunities particularly to females in remote areas through community development initiatives. During discussions, young people unanimously lauded and appreciated the effort of AKDN for the betterment, empowerment and development of Gilgit-Baltistan. AKES has revolutionised the educational system in Gilgit-Baltistan, said one of the youth from Hunza Nager.

Today, in Pakistan, AKES operates 192 schools that educate over 36,000 students and employ over 1,600 teachers<sup>28</sup>. Young people believe that AKES has lifted the standard of education and given the young generation a platform to learn and compete with the rest of Pakistan. There were some minor criticisms – one participant from Astore stated that AKES should be more inclusive and involve people from all the districts to better utilise their efforts; one young person from Ghizer district complained about AKES being too community-centric in delivering services, but most young people view AKES as a model that simply transforms the region.

It has transformed education in Hunza, which has the highest education ranking in Gilgit-Baltistan. According to Alif Ailaan, 2014<sup>29</sup>, Hunza district stands fifth in the district education score across Pakistan. (By contrast, Dimer district ranks 128th showing the intra district difference in education.) One young person from Hunza remarked that Aga Khan III, Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah, played an enormous role by opening up Diamond Jubilee schools more than six decades ago in Hunza.

Cultural and religious sensitivities in the region severely limit women's autonomy, but increased emphasis on girls' education is spreading to areas within the region which were previously noted for their resistance to it. This is evident by the growing number of requests to AKES and other NGOs for educational and community development support. Gradually, women are coming out of their homes and taking their place in the wider community. Gilgit-Baltistan can be seen as one of the areas where community work can be seen in abundance.

26 *Pakistan Education Statistics 2010-2011*. Islamabad: AEPAM

27 *Annual Status of Education Report, ASER-Pakistan 2013*

28 Retrieved 2013, from [www.akdn.org/pakistan\\_education.asp](http://www.akdn.org/pakistan_education.asp)

29 Alif Ailaan Pakistan District Education Ranking 2014 (Islamabadd : Alif Ailan & SDPI, 2014)

## Overall perspectives on education

Young people believe that the education sector does not appear to be the top priority of government. The allocation fund is very low. Of the total budget of 24.95 billion Pakistani rupees for the year 2013-2014, only 629 million Pakistani rupees<sup>30</sup> is allocated for education, 3 per cent of the total budget. One participant remarked that most of the allocated budget is spent on salaries and non-developmental funds, and this shows the lack of government commitment towards education. There is a widespread belief that teachers in government schools are not well trained – young people of Gilgit-Baltistan feel that those who do not get jobs in any other sector try their luck in the educational system. They are not professionally trained teachers so they are unable to train a nation.

Young people feel that their education system does not empower them to play leadership roles in society. They believe that it holds back the developing socioeconomic and political life of Gilgit-Baltistan. Young people believe that it is not shaping

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30 Retrieved from [www.visitgilgitbaltistan.gov.pk/](http://www.visitgilgitbaltistan.gov.pk/)

## Economic prospects

The Gilgit-Baltistan region is endowed with abundant natural resources. The Indus river, which flows through Gilgit-Baltistan, offers vast hydro potential not only within the region but across Pakistan. The region is a notable supplier of many important minerals to the country as well as the world. In the south of the region, there are major deposits of nickel, cobalt, copper, lead, tin, mica, quartz, zircon, coal and actinolite that are of exceptionally good quality. There are also substantial resources of iron, silver, gold, zinc, marble, granite, sulphur, calcite, fluorite, limestone, arsenic, spinel, garnet, epidot, topaz, moon stone, pargasite, tourmaline, aquamarine, pyrite and feldspar in the north-eastern, northern and north-western parts of the area (Hussainabadi, 2003)<sup>31</sup>. The region is also one of the country's largest producers of stone jewellery.

Young people of Gilgit-Baltistan are very optimistic given these economic resources. There is a strong hope and belief that the region can be economically self-sufficient. The narrative of self-sufficiency is deep rooted, which gives strength and hope to the economically marginalised young generation. This has been boosted by the considerable expansion and diversification, in areas such as

the younger generation as learners, thinkers and an effective social being. "Our education system needs complete restructuring; we have to improve quality of management, monitoring, supervision and above all teaching if we want to compete in the contemporary world", said one contributor to the FGD in Islamabad.

Youth also underlined that quality education depends on the provision of basic infrastructure as without it, neither students nor teachers can do justice to their work. They also referred to various recent studies highlighting that Gilgit-Baltistan students on average performed poorly and noted that poverty is also a factor that prevents parents from sending their children to public or private schools; so they prefer to send their children to madrassas where education is totally free.

Finally, young people noted that Gilgit-Baltistan is experiencing an acute brain drain. With very limited job opportunities in public and private sectors alike, educated youth either shift to big cities like Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad or simply go abroad for a better future.

trade, transportation, mineral resources and communication in the past few years. There has been rapid growth of communication during the last 10 to 12 years, connecting Gilgit-Baltistan with the rest of the Pakistan. The hotel industry in the area has brought a new dynamism and prosperity.

However, there are barriers to economic growth. Poor infrastructure and lack of investment has undermined its economic potential. Across Gilgit-Baltistan, there has been no large scale development in the potential growth sectors, like energy, tourism, mining etc. Initiatives to develop mining in the region face many limitations. The geographical proximity to the KPK province of Pakistan, and 'war on terror', has undermined the tourist industry. A lack of human, technical and financial resources, and the uncertain constitutional status, makes it difficult to obtain investment for industrial development of industries and limits the capacity of communities to negotiate with public and private actors over areas of economic potential.

### Young people's perspectives

Young people believe that the region has the potential to change the economic fortune of the whole country, however they feel economically deprived and politically alienated. They relate their economic problems to the larger conflict of Jammu and

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31 Hussainabadi, Y. Tareekh-e-Baltistan (2003)

Kashmir. They believe that the ambiguous status of the territory has prevented respective governments from designing policies on their economic needs and potential. Consequently, this has resulted in deep rooted poverty, with scarce economic opportunities.

One consequence is a resort to highly damaging livelihoods. An alarming trend highlighted by young people during FGDs is the dependence of local people on environmentally damaging practices. This is most commonly evidenced by deforestation, and with wood being taken at a commercial level mostly without the permission of relevant authorities. The forests of Gilgit-Balistan are fast depleting and according to a young man from Diamer smuggling of wood is now an accepted norm and practice.

In the FGDS, the youth stressed the need to expand and diversify the economic base to empower locals. They acknowledge there has been a slight improvement, with the introduction of some high-tech and heavy industries in this largely rural society. As one young person complained: "We have resources but we have issues of technology, trained human capital and connectivity with the region. We have to develop our industry on the modern lines. We lack in value addition; we do not have fruit processing units, stone cutting, grafting and polishing machines, and above all human resources." Young people state that if the government gives importance to tourism and forestry, and effectively utilises other natural resources, they can build a strong industrial base. "Despite having economic potential, we do not have a finance minister in our government," said a youth from Ghizer.

Young people believe that they achieve economic uplift and prosperity if they have global connectivity and the region is open for everybody. However, there is resentment over the removal of SSR. Some feel that SSR was revoked from Gilgit-Baltistan for purely economic purposes and, unlike in AJK, outsiders can now acquire land and assets in Gilgit-Baltistan. Despite this, young people argue federal government discourages international investment by barring foreign companies, which is a stumbling block for the economic prosperity of the region. They believe that international investment is discouraged by the government of Pakistan because of the disputed nature of the territory. For example, the Legislative Assembly has imposed a ban on gemstone mining and the exportation of precious stones from the region, even though it is uncertain whether this capacity falls within their jurisdiction. One young person from Astore stated; "This is inconsistent with the government's approach in other parts of Gilgit-Baltistan including in Diamer, where Pakistan recently laid the first

stone of a mega project, the Bhasha Dam." This dam project raises another widely expressed economic grievance: Gilgit-Baltistan will not be paid any royalty for revenues generated by this initiative since it is not a constitutional province of Pakistan. Young people across Gilgit-Baltistan believe that the federal government should evolve a mechanism to pay royalties to the people, otherwise this gives an impression that Pakistan is more concerned with addressing the needs of others rather than local people.

One youth remarked that they did not have political representation in the mainstream politics of Pakistan, so they feel unable to lobby for laws and regulations that protect their economic interests. They believe that royalties and the distribution of natural resources should be done on the basis of justice and equality as in other provinces, but they are not given royalty like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) and other provinces.

Similarly, young people questioned for this research complained that there is absolutely no transparent mechanism on the disclosure of revenues earned from tourism. One person opined that federal government collects trekking fees, environmental protection fees and expedition adventure fees, but it neither declares these revenues publically nor shares any earnings with local communities.

In another example, one participant from Hunza noted that the federal government should disclose the amount of revenue it receives in duties from trucks entering from China. The money is not going to local communities. This is seen as unfair given that local land faces increased environmental damage as a result of the heavy traffic and the construction of new infrastructure to support the border crossing. One political activist from the PPP stated that such centralised control depicts the colonial mindset of federal government. Another participant in the FGD in Islamabad commented: "We are witnessing economic discrimination between people in Gilgit-Baltistan and those from other provinces because we have no voice in the National Assembly and other forums of decision making."

These attitudes exemplify the widespread frustration that potential areas of revenue generation are out of the jurisdiction of Gilgit-Baltistan assembly, and are managed and controlled by federal government. This contrasts strongly with the position in Pakistan's four provinces, where under the 18th amendment to the constitution powers over areas like oil, gas, minerals, dams and tourism have been transferred back to the provinces allowing them to accrue

the financial benefits. There is seemingly a large constituency of youth that believe the same rights will not be accorded to Gilgit-Baltistan until the resolution of the Kashmir conflict.

### **Cross LoC linkages and economic integration**

Like other parts of the former state of Jammu and Kashmir, Gilgit-Baltistan has also witnessed the impact of the divide as Baltistan on the Pakistani side and Kargil and Leh on the Indian side share common ethnicity, dialect and culture. Historically there has always been a deep connectivity and linkage on both sides. People on both sides have been woven by common geography, history and cultural values. Two main land routes connect parts of this divide, the Skardu (Pakistani side) to Kargil (Indian side) road and the Khaplu (Pakistani side) and Leh (Indian side) road; both lie on the ancient Silk Road.

Unlike in AJK, where there is a widespread demand for opening up the LoC for people to people contact, the demand of cross LoC connectivity in Gilgit-Baltistan is less widespread. While there is a strong demand by young people belonging to the Baltistan and Skardu region for opening up of trade and travel links to revive and restore centuries old relations, young people belonging to Gilgit city, Astore, Diamer and even Hunza appear to be less interested about the LoC connectivity – indeed some have a strong fear of enmity and hostility from India, given the backdrop of the Kargil War in 1999. Another reason for the relative lack of interest in opening up of routes is also the geographical distance of the Gilgit division from the LoC.

Young people in AJK stress the need to open the LoC for trade and travel as part of a larger peace building framework<sup>32</sup>, but in case of Gilgit-Baltistan young people view cross LoC connectivity from a different perspective. They believe that this connectivity can change the economic fortune of the entire region through tourism and trade. Young people believe that this region has the potential to serve as a corridor to connect China, India and Pakistan with the rest of the world. Speaking during the FGDs, most young people wanted to benefit from the increased tourism potential through greater access to both sides as well as the potential to build and sustain peace through tourism. This is considerable given that Ladakh and Gilgit-Baltistan occupy a spectacular mountain region. A reopened road would merge Baltistan's enchantment with the cultural heritage of Ladakh, which already attracts

more than 40,000 Western tourists a year. The road would also provide pilgrims direct access to various shrines and religious relics in this region precious to Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus.

Though Pakistan and India have opened five foot-crossings across the LoC, Gilgit-Baltistan and Ladakh are yet to receive its dividend. One of the young people from Skardu stated: "I am from divided family, my parents are undergoing the pain of divide, we have deeper cultural and strong ethnic bonds with the people living on the other side of LoC. It appears our divide is now a forgotten reality, but we will never reconcile with this divide." Ismael Khan, a development expert from Skardu, has written that the people of Gilgit-Baltistan ask: "If the road between Srinagar and Muzaffarabad in Kashmir, at the very center of the conflict, could be unbolted, if the border between Pakistani and Indian Punjab where a hell of murder and mayhem took place at the time of Partition, can be opened for all kind of exchanges, why not us?"<sup>33</sup>

Although there has been consistent demand from specific groups to open LoC for people-to-people contact – nationalist groups like the Gilgit-Baltistan United Movement and the Open Border Movement have vociferously made this demand – it appears that this constituency cannot garner larger public support and build pressure on successive governments on either side to open up the centuries old road links. Consequently, this demand does not get priority on the agenda of political parties in Gilgit-Baltistan.

### **Tourism potential**

Young people believe that the scenic beauty of Gilgit-Baltistan should be attractive to local and non-local investors in the tourism industry, but the worsening law and order situation has led to a sharp decline in the tourism industry. In the past, tourism in Gilgit-Baltistan has been inhibited by Pakistan's agenda to keep the region cut off from the outside world. However, having realised the economic potential of tourism, the government of Pakistan has relaxed controls. The official website of the government of Gilgit-Baltistan lists the tourist attractions of Gilgit-Baltistan: vast tract of snow-covered area, 101 peaks, 119 lakes and 5100 glaciers, 6592 sq. km of forests (constituting 9.1 per cent of the total area) which include national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and game reserves. In addition, there are seven Asia Pacific Heritage Conservation, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and British Airways award-

32 See Ali, W. *The Impact of Conflict on Young People in Azad Jammu and Kashmir* (London: Conciliation Resources, 2014)

33 M. Ismail Khan, righting the wrongs, retrieved from [www.claudearpi.net/maintenance/uploaded\\_pics/RightingtheWrongs.pdf](http://www.claudearpi.net/maintenance/uploaded_pics/RightingtheWrongs.pdf)



*Young people documenting the challenges and opportunities they confront in their daily lives in Skardu (2013). © CPDR*

winning historical sites, 23 historical forts, 75 polo grounds, 65 archaeological sites, more than 39,000 rock carvings and inscriptions, year-long festivals, some devoted to indigenous music<sup>34</sup>.

Despite these unique resources, young people of Gilgit-Baltistan are unable to harness the potential. "We do not have infrastructure, roads and above all the government is not serious in projecting Gilgit-Baltistan as the tourist land," one complained. Another stated that although the government has the political will to promote tourism, unfortunately, tourism is subject to the Gilgit-Baltistan Council.

Many young people believe that poor government policies and inefficiency are the major blocks in the tourism industry, but there is a larger consensus that sectarianism and terrorism are also key factors. The deteriorating law and order situation has impacted on tourism, and now even local tourists are wary of visiting the area. Young people believe that sectarianism has massively affected tourism. One youth stated that sectarian clashes and political instability have always led to curfews, emergencies, closure of the market, target killings, business loss and exploitation of natural resources.

There is a systematic decline in tourist flow. Analysis of incoming tourists shows a rapid downturn in the number of tourists after 1998, which may be due to the Kargil incident, when

the area was not considered secure for tourists. Some countries not only prohibited, but also quickly removed their citizens from Pakistan. There were only 8,976 tourists in 2000. In 2001, a little improvement was observed with 15,685 tourists; but in 2002, the number drastically declined to 2,000. In the following years (2003–08), the number of tourists was 5,051, 9,191, 9,944, 33,218 and 61,988 respectively, showing gradual improvement despite the sectarian clashes in 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2008. This indicates that although sectarian clashes have impacts on tourism locally, other reasons such as the war on terror might have greater negative impacts. In 2009, the number again declined to 2,544 (Khan, 2012)<sup>35</sup>. The worsening tourism situation has larger connectivity with the political structure of Gilgit-Baltistan.

### **Community development**

Despite the challenges posed by political and constitutional structures, people of Gilgit-Baltistan have created some mechanisms of economic development and empowerment through community development. In this respect, community-based organisations are beacons of hope.

The Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP), an organ of the Aga Khan Foundation, developed a strategy of participatory development by establishing village, and later, intra-village

<sup>34</sup> Baloch, I. S. *Tourism Development in Gilgit Baltistan-Situation Analysis and Investment* (Retrieved June 2014)

<sup>35</sup> Khan, K. 'Tourism downfall: sectarianism an apparent major cause, in Gilgit-Baltistan' *Journal of Political Studies*, 5 (2012)

organisations. Village organisations and women's organisations are the principal 'self-sustaining' institutions that can enter into development partnerships with governmental and private agencies. Village organisations collect contributions from households, which are put into a fund managed by an elected village organisation manager and bookkeeper. These institutions help facilitate projects that include infrastructure, health, enterprise development, micro-financing and micro-insurance, and leadership and skills training. In the late 1990s, the AKRSP also helped village organisations and women's organisations federate into valley or union council-level institutions. The community organisations are legal entities, usually registered under the company ordinance of the government of Pakistan, and work in collaboration with the government, NGOs and donor agencies to assist communities with development.

In areas like Hunza, people primarily rely on local dispute resolution bodies and faith-based tribunals like the Ismaili Council to resolve their daily problems. These bodies actively seek to strengthen the political awareness of people within Gilgit-Baltistan. Members of these organisations contend that people have not been able to effectively lobby the government of Pakistan, not only because of the

democratic deficit, but also because people in the region are not politically savvy. A youth from Hunza said: "I cannot blame the community because we were under the Mir system of government. No one was allowed to even go to Gilgit without permission of the Mir." And he added: "We did not have any idea of democracy. We are always dependent on others and the region lacks sufficient political awareness."

These local organisations have done commendable work in the area of economic and social development. They play a critical role in managing and governing natural resources despite the constitutional issues. A young person from Diامر said: "Local organisations are crucial to developing capacity, providing information, sensitising communities and creating platforms for political lobbying." These organisations frequently go beyond the local level to collaborate with national and international donors, as well as different levels of government, to construct community infrastructure, develop business ventures and enhance educational opportunities. The creation of community controlled hunting areas is one example of how local institutions engage with the legal, non-legal, local and global actors in order to improve livelihoods in their communities.

## Conclusion

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Young people of Gilgit-Baltistan suffer from the territory's undefined and ambiguous status. Despite differing grievances and divergent views over the association of Gilgit-Baltistan with the Kashmir conflict, there is unanimous consensus that their current sociopolitical vulnerability and uncertainty are connected with this conflict. Although most young people do not want to be part of the solution of the Kashmir conflict – and strongly favour being a province within Pakistan – there is acceptance that they are also a part of it.

Young people believe that they have been deprived of their political rights under the pretext of the Kashmir conflict. As a consequence, local political institutions have not evolved and left a huge vacuum which is filled by clergy. Most young people surveyed in this research lauded the Self Governance Order 2009, but strongly contest that it alone would address their exclusion from the political and legal forums of Pakistan, which they feel is the denial of their rights.

Sectarian violence has become a very important issue. It is widely perceived as an outside phenomenon which exploits the sentiments of local

youth. There is a growing concern over the rising extremist tendencies and violent incidents. Young people have strong hopes that sustained political process and empowered government can manage and transform sectarian issues by making it a part of social dialogue.

Overall, young people consider unemployment and poor governance as their core issues and argue that these issues are the direct culmination of their undefined status, which structurally impedes investment and market access in a globalised world. Young people believe that this ambiguity has not only resulted in unemployment, but has also deprived them from harnessing their untapped resources and sustained geographical isolation. It results in a belief that they have paid (and continue to pay) a huge cost as a result of the Kashmir conflict. This is perhaps best summed up by one youth in a FGD: "Instead of evolving a true democratic mechanism that ensures participation, we cannot settle down the issue of who we are and who should govern us, and this ambiguity has a deeper socioeconomic and political cost that we are bearing. Despite having natural resources, young people like me are unemployed."

## Abbreviations

|       |  |         |   |
|-------|--|---------|---|
| AJK   | Azad Jammu and Kashmir                         | LoC     | Line of Control   |
| AKDN  | Aga Khan Development Network                   | LFO     | Legal Framework Order   |
| AKES  | Aga Khan Educational Services programme        | NA      | Northern Areas  |
| AKRSP | Aga Khan Rural Support Program                 | NALC    | Northern Areas Legislative Council                              |
| CEC   | Chief Election Commissioner                    | NFC     | National Finance Commission                                     |
| FA    | Fine Arts                                      | NGO     | Non-governmental organisations                                  |
| FCR   | Frontier Crime Regulations                     | PML (N) | Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz)                                  |
| FGD   | Focus group discussions                        | PPP     | Pakistan People's Party   |
| FSc   | Faculty of Science                             | PSC     | Public Service Commission                                       |
| ICS   | Intermediate in Computer Sciences              | SSR     | State Subject Rule  |
| KANA  | Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas | UN      | United Nations  |
| KPK   | Khyber Pakhtunkhwa                             | UNCIP   | United Nations Commission in India and Pakistan                 |
|       |  | UNESCO  | United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization |

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The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Conciliation Resources.

Note: Kashmir denotes the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir comprising Indian and Pakistani-administered Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan. Azad Jammu and Kashmir denotes Pakistani-administered Kashmir.

## About Conciliation Resources

Conciliation Resources is an independent organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence and build peace. We provide advice, support and practical resources to help divided communities resolve their differences peacefully. In addition, we take what we learn to government decision-makers and others working to end conflict, to improve policies and peacebuilding practice worldwide.

Our programme work focuses on seven conflict-affected regions around the world, including Kashmir, and we take a further in-depth look at specific conflict contexts and peacebuilding themes through our *Accord* publication series: [www.c-r.org/accord](http://www.c-r.org/accord)

Conciliation Resources promotes participation of Kashmiris in the India-Pakistan peace process. We work in all regions of the disputed area including Pakistan-administered Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan, and in India-administered Jammu and Kashmir. We also work with Kashmiri diaspora. Together, we can find peaceful alternatives to violence.



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## About Centre for Peace, Development and Reforms (CPDR)

Centre for Peace, Development and Reforms (CPDR) was founded in 2010 to promote and encourage peace and development at all levels through dialogue, reconciliation and reforms. CPDR is based in Islamabad and Mirpur in Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan. It was established by civil society activists to promote fresh perspectives on cross-border confidence building on the Kashmir issue between India and Pakistan. The centre regularly organises events focusing on governance in Kashmir.

CPDR and Conciliation Resources are working in partnership to strengthen people-to-people contact, particularly in the realm of trade. Additionally, Conciliation Resources provides professional support to CPDR to increase its peacebuilding skills and influence policies at all levels.

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