ORIGINAL PAPER

Participation Strategies and Ethical Considerations in NGO Led Community-Based Conservation Initiatives

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Abstract

This study examines the participation strategies of an environmental non-governmental organization (NGO) in community-based conservation (CBC) initiatives in the developing country context of Pakistan. We use local Pakistani concepts and terms to interpret and narrate our study. Drawing on the micro-mobilization literature, our analysis embeds a situated analysis of the *'biradari'* (kinship) structures that pervade Pakistani social and cultural milieu. We shed light on the importance of various gatekeepers in providing access and ongoing support for CBC initiatives, suggesting NGOs must navigate complex cultural and social structures to manage participation in developing country contexts. Here our findings point to the importance of local knowledge not just in articulating community needs but also in articulating participation strategies. Furthermore, even though 'elite' structures have the potential to jeopardize equitable participation and project long-term sustainability, our analysis suggests interacting and gaining *'bharosa'* (trust) of communities' via these structures is critical to participation. While previous research has called into doubt the efficacy of CBC in advancing conservation, we suggest that frequent and culturally atoned engagement is a must for environmental NGOs working in socially entrenched developing nations. Our research brings to light the complex ethical terrain navigated by environmental NGOs in CBC projects, illuminating the inherent potential for both empowering and subjugating outcomes.

Keywords Environmental NGO · Accountability · Participation · Community-based conservation

Introduction

In the interface of biodiversity conservation and socio-economic development, community-based conservation [CBC] initiatives have arisen as an innovative approach (Berkes, 2004). These strategies, by combining ecological and socio-economic objectives, endeavor to find a balance between conservation outcomes and community development needs (Adams & Hulme, 2001). Yet, this integration brings to light complex ethical dimensions that encompass both the environmental and socio-economic domains (Brechin et al., 2002). Within this complex landscape, the role of environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) becomes pivotal as these bodies often function as the catalysts, facilitators, and mediators of action (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Scherrer, 2009). Environmental NGOs must navigate a complex cultural and social terrain, involving a multitude of explicit and implicit ethical considerations. From the clear ethical responsibilities to the communities they serve and the biodiversity they aim to conserve, to the more subtle ethical dimensions related to respect for cultural diversity, informed consent, and local knowledge systems (Goodwin, 1998), NGOs find themselves operating within a complex ethical landscape. In this paper, we aim to critically explore the role of an environmental NGO and the cultural and social structures it leverages to foster participation in conservation initiatives. In doing so, we seek to provide a nuanced understanding of CBC, the ethics surrounding participation and the pivotal role the environmental NGO plays in this context.

The prior literature on environmental NGOs within the discourse of business ethics and NGO accountability has extensively explored their relationships and interactions in

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relation to corporations, particularly within the framework of multi-stakeholder partnerships (e.g., Baur & Palazzo, 2011; Baur & Schmitz, 2012; Brand, et al., 2020; Jepson, 2005; O'Sullivan & O'Dwyer, 2009; Unerman & O'Dwyer, 2006) and also examined disclosure practice (Deegan & Islam, 2014; Islam & van Staden, 2018). Yet there is still a discernible gap concerning the role of these environmental NGOs vis-a-vis the communities they serve (i.e. their downward accountability). A critical lacuna in the NGO literature here lies in addressing the complex equilibrium that must be struck between community livelihoods and the pressing need for environmental conservation (Martinez-Alier, 2002). This is especially of significance given the parallel debates in the critical conservation literature which question the efficacy and ethics of CBC interventions (Buscher & Fletcher, 2019; 2020; Fletcher, 2012; Oomenn et al., 2019; Sullivan, 2000, 2006), and consider differing power dynamics inherent in participation interventions (Hickey & Mohan, 2004; Kothari, 2001). In this paper, we leverage CBC critiques to better comprehend the participation strategies employed by environmental NGOs. Although there is an increasing awareness of power imbalances in communities, little is known about how NGO practitioners recognize and navigate these imbalances. This insight aids in refining NGO approaches for more effective ground-level involvement and sheds light on the interplay between downward accountability of environmental NGOs and the navigation of local power dynamics.

The subject of our analytical attention in this paper are the community-based organizations [CBOs] founded by CENGO, a transnational environmental NGO operating in Pakistan. We investigate how CENGO engages participants in conservation efforts by developing a context specific conceptual framework, drawing on the literature on social movements[1] and concepts of *biradari* (kinship) that are cornerstones of Pakistani community relations (Lieven, 2011).

We find CENGO must navigate complex cultural and social structures to manage participation in CBC initiatives shedding light on the importance of various gatekeepers in providing access and ongoing support for CBC initiatives. Furthermore, even though 'elite' structures have the potential to jeopardize equitable participation and project long-term sustainability, our research reveals that interacting with these structures is critical to participation. While previous research has called into doubt the efficacy of CBC

in advancing conservation, we suggest that frequent and culturally atoned engagement is a must for environmental NGOs working in socially entrenched developing nations. As a result, in their CBC initiatives, NGOs must maintain a sophisticated grasp of local power structures, harnessing local knowledge, which in turn have substantial impact on how NGOs construct and implement their mobilization strategies.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows: The following section provides a critical review of NGOs and CBC participation, which is followed by a section on the theoretical and analytical framework guiding the study. We then outline our research method and present a discussion of our findings, before concluding the paper.

NGOs and Community-Based Conservation

There has been a growing body of literature seeking to critically engage with the role, actions and accountability of NGOs (Gray et al., 2006; Lehman, 2007). While research into NGO accountability has been growing in recent years, studies have largely focused on examining the emergence and impact of various accountability mechanisms (Chenhall et al., 2013; Dixon et al., 2006; O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2007; O'Leary, 2017) and examined the effect of these accountability mechanisms on NGO operations (Cazenave & Morales, 2021; O'Dwyer & Boomsma, 2015). More recent research has theorized the extent to which, and to whom, NGOs should be held accountable (O'Dwyer & Boomsma, 2015; Ebrahim, 2003; Unerman & O'Dwyer, 2006), with a growing body of literature emphasizing greater beneficiary/community agency and voice (i.e. downward accountability) in NGO accountability relationships (Dewi et al., 2021; Yasmin et al., 2021). This focus resonates with the 'community' centric approach embedded within CBC initiatives.

Since the 1980s, CBC efforts in developing countries have been important, emphasizing the inclusion of the views and interests of local people (Western et al., 1994). The central philosophy behind this model, now deeply embedded in guidelines from global institutions such as the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), posits that conservation and development should coexist harmoniously, being treated with equal emphasis, and pursued concurrently to achieve mutual benefits (Adams & Hulme, 2001; Tai, 2007). NGOs, despite critiques on their roles and intentions (Srinivas, 2009), engage in CBC initiatives to align with their values and assure the longevity of their projects. They often make development promises to ground-level communities within these initiatives (O'Leary, 2017), though the dynamics of such engagements, as Maher (2022) elucidates, are layered and often contentious.

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[1] We can draw significant parallels between the literature on social movements and the micro-mobilization initiatives taken by CENGO in a local context to engage communities in conservation issues, even though our context does not specifically equate to a social movement as such. In this sense, CBOs are examples of micro-mobilization, which is the mobilization of small communities to take an active role in and ownership of conservation issues.

The conservation literature presents a complex narrative regarding the effectiveness of CBC approaches. While some research indicates the positive aspects of CBCs (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Tai, 2007), others critically highlight the inherent challenges and unintended consequences they might introduce (Buscher & Fletcher, 2019; 2020; Fletcher, 2012; Sullivan, 2000, 2006; Oomenn et al., 2019). Two divergent positions emerge from this latter discourse. One believes that CBC endeavors, though rooted in sound concepts, suffer from weak execution, particularly in the devolution of authority and the actualization of responsibilities (Murphree, 2002; Songorwa, 1999). This perspective underscores the susceptibility of CBC projects to the intricacies of local politics, potential dominance by local elites, and external influences, especially when significant economic benefits are in the offing (Bardhan, 2002; Platteau, 2004; Platteau & Gaspart, 2003). These challenges often intensify when the initiatives lack solid institutional foundations (Bardhan, 2002).

The second position is more radical, proposing that the entire concept of CBC is conceptually flawed and viewed as a conservation fad (Fletcher et al., 2016; Redford et al., 2013). This perspective suggests that the intertwined objectives of conservation and development, though noble individually, become counterproductive when combined and should hence be delinked (Redford & Sanderson, 2000). This argument is grounded in extensive critiques by scholars who highlight the unforeseen negative consequences and power dynamics inherent in these frameworks (Massarella et al., 2018, 2020). Berkes (2004) importantly notes that the discussion should shift from the binary of CBC "working" or "not working" to understanding the conditions that influence these outcomes. This sentiment is echoed by scholars such as Waylen et al. (2010), emphasizing the paramount importance of cultural and local institutional contexts in the trajectory of conservation initiatives.

The Perils of Participation

It is critical to recognize that while encouraging local community involvement is important in terms of tapping local knowledge and ideas, it is not a panacea. As Kothari (2001) and Hickey and Mohan (2004) point out, participation can at times be manipulated as a tool for control, perpetuating power imbalances, rather than genuinely empowering communities. Hence, whilst CBC and participatory development have become predominant paradigms in conservation and development discourse there remains a palpable disconnect in the understanding and management of power asymmetries inherent to these approaches (Cook & Kothari, 2001; Mosse, 2018). Often, these initiatives have been accused of relegating to a merely technical framework, neglecting the political

intricacies and sidelining the genuine considerations of the local community members (Cook & Kothari, 2001).

For example, community members who occupy positions of power can sometimes exert gate-keeping functions that are difficult to challenge, especially when these roles are informally established (Baily, 2014; Larson & Ribot, 2004). Concurrently, there is a narrative in the literature suggesting that less privileged community members often expect and prefer gatekeeping, looking up to the village elites to oversee aid projects and in some cases, even further their personal interests as a compensation for their leadership (Mansuri & Rao, 2004; Platteau & Gaspart, 2003). Furthermore, according to Bardhan (2002), there is an implicit acceptance of intra-community inequality, which is typically rationalized by communities as recognizing the elites' administrative and political talents. Despite the richness of knowledge gained from these studies, there is still a significant gap in understanding how those delivering projects, such as NGOs, approach these power dynamics. Even as the existence of power imbalances within communities is recognized, a comprehensive understanding of how these imbalances shape participation, resource accessibility, and the overall efficacy of interventions remains elusive.

Thus, while the role of NGOs and other external bodies in gaining access to communities has been well-documented, the actual engagement dynamics NGOs undertake to ensure participation, remains inadequately understood. The NGO accountability literature here is also limited. A small number of studies that have sought to understand downward accountability to beneficiaries have mainly taken a reporting focus or been explicitly focused on development aid NGOs (Ebrahim, 2003; O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2007; O'Leary, 2017). The existing literature does not engage with CBC and development, nor does it consider how power relationships at the grassroots level can influence the effectiveness of NGO interventions. Our research sheds light on these critical issues and in doing so contributes a novel micro-mobilization dimension to the existing discourse on NGO-CBC participation.

Theorizing Micro-mobilization and Participation

Micro-mobilization can be defined as *'the range of interactive processes devised and employed by social movement organizations and their representative actors to mobilize or influence various target groups with respect to the pursuit of collective or common interests'* (Snow et al., 1986: p. 465). Western social movement theorists have put forward a few different explanations for how social movements engage in processes of micro-mobilization. Earlier work by McAdam (1986), for instance, identified intense ideological

identification with the values of the movement, prior history of activism and integration into supportive networks as influential factors that distinguished who wanted to take part in a protest movement but never did, with those that actually participated. Taking a more comprehensive approach, Klandermans and Oegema (1987) and Oegema and Klandermans (1994), using the Dutch peace movement as their empirical site, outline mobilization potential, recruitment networks and mobilization, motivation, and willingness to participate, and actual participation as the different steps important for micro-mobilization. Beyerlein and Hipp (2006) modelled movement participation as a two-stage process in which individuals were differentiated based on their willingness to participate and then, whether they actually participated. This allowed them to identify factors influencing willingness to protest and, separately, factors influencing actual participation. They found social networks to play a strong role in actual participation rates. Similarly, other prior research on social movements has also found social structures/ties and social networks to be vitally important in social movement participation (Barkan et al., 1995; McAdam & Paulsen, 1993; Passy & Guigni, 2001; Snow et al., 1980; Ward, 2016). Prior research here suggests the value and strength of social structures influence both ideological affinity and barriers to participation (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow, 2004; Snow et al., 1986).

While Western understandings of social networks offer universal insights, non-Western literature underscores the need to contextualize these ideas within specific cultural and historical settings. Mosse (2018) for example argues that social constructs such as caste, religion, and regional identities, pivotal in the Indian socio-cultural milieu, significantly shape social networks and influence collective mobilization. Whilst Lee's (2007) extensive research on labor protests in China documents the crucial role of informal networks, which thrive on trust within close-knit communities, in organizing dissent in a restrictive political environment. Other research in the Arab context points to the importance of collective ideology over individual ties (Badiou, 2005), whilst research in Thailand points to the importance of traditional structures, like village or temple communities, in crafting the contours of societal networks (Winichakul, 1994). Consequently, we develop our conceptual framework with insight from the cultural and social realities of Pakistan.

The Pakistani Context

Pakistan, a nation born out of a fervent demand for a separate homeland for South Asia's Muslims in 1947, has a diverse social fabric woven with complex historical, religious, and cultural threads. Islam's role in Pakistani society cannot be understated. It influences social norms, legal structures, and political discourse. A dominant feature of Pakistani social relations is the centrality of family (Javid, 2011; Lieven, 2011). The family serves as the primary social, economic, and sometimes political unit. Derived from pre-partition India's caste system and further complicated by socioeconomic stratification post-independence, class distinctions are prominent (Jodhka, 2002). While caste might not have the same ritualistic underpinnings as in parts of India, it plays a role in marriage alliances, political mobilization, and occupational stratification. At the same time an urban–rural divide manifests in disparities in education, health, and economic opportunities, as well as differing views on progress and traditionalism (Ali & Nyborg, 2010). Intertwined within these aspects is the collectivist nature of Pakistan's society, where group cohesion and collective harmony are prioritized above individual desires.

In the complex social fabric of Pakistan, the *biradari* system stands as a significant cornerstone that shapes societal norms, roles, and expectations. The *biradari* system, which can be translated as a "code of kinship" (Javid, 2011; Lieven, 2011) mandates adherence to established societal roles, particularly in a context marred by widespread corruption and bureaucratic barriers. *Biradaris* are occupationally stratified, endogamous kin groups that are frequently confused with castes or tribes. While a *biradari* can be subdivided further, the essential distinction is between *biradaris* of landless workers, craftsmen, cultivating tenants, and landowners (Javid, 2011). The *biradari* system is not only prevalent in rural contexts but also resonates deeply within urban communities, underscoring its entrenched nature in Pakistani social life. The *biradari* operates as a dual-edged sword. On one hand, it acts as a protective shield, offering both a sense of identity and safety. In such a milieu, individuals rarely exist without the enveloping embrace of their family and kin. On the other hand, the all-encompassing nature of the *biradari* system complicates the development of a broader, common identity beyond one's immediate kin (Lieven, 2011). This kinship-centric power dynamic is indispensable for societal cohesion. Here, the political dimension of the *biradari* system is also worth noting; here scholars argues that the political ascendancy of elites, especially in rural areas, is contingent not merely on their wealth but on their leadership within clans or kinship networks (Chatterjee, 2004; Khan et al., 2022).

Considering the profound implications of the *biradari* system, it becomes essential to incorporate this understanding when analyzing micro-mobilization in the Pakistani context as it offers a window into the unique idiosyncrasies that characterize Pakistani society. Furthermore, by delving into the *biradari* system, we are also ushering in a nuanced power analysis, an aspect often overlooked in Western scholarly debate on micromobilization. Our analysis emphasizes the centrality of cultural norms, values, and traditions in shaping and influencing participatory behaviors

and engagements. This is important as it allows the identification of culturally situated ways, social structures and their antecedents might influence participation at *multiple* analytically distinct steps (rather than just a single step) in the micro-mobilization process. This theoretical understanding is important in our research where we seek to understand how NGOs engage local communities in conservation movements[2] in non-Western contexts.

Case Background and Research Method

Pakistan has a long history of community-based participation. Various hierarchical social structures (such as mosques, caste, and post-colonial structures) have played a strong part in community activity and in the ordering of community relations, dialogue and consensus (Rasheed & Ahmed, 2012). These institutions are still an integral part of the rural communities of Pakistan where over 65% of the population reside (NDC, 2021). As such, the concept of community-based conservation has often been seen as a natural extension to the activities of these traditional social structures. Traditionally informal, over recent years a more formal form of CBC has started to develop in the country (Khan et al., 2022). The impetus for the creation of formal CBC initiatives began in the early nineties, as Pakistan became signatory to the Convention on Biological Diversity which amongst a raft of other measures also calls for the involvement of custodian communities in conservation efforts (Rasheed & Ahmed, 2012). Consequently, various National, Provincial and District Conservation Strategies were devised that paid particular attention to community involvement and the sustainable development and improved efficiency in the use and management of resources. However, a few challenges persist in the country linked to political instability, lack of technical and institutional capacity and lack of financial resources. For instance, government institutions do not have sufficient capacity or expertise to fulfill their responsibilities, often proving to be less effective than traditional informal structures (Khan et al., 2022). The Forest and Wildlife Department of Pakistan, for example, was found to have limited human and financial resources, corrupt practices, insufficient remuneration and poor organizational structures, adversely affecting its ability to engage in conservation efforts (Ali & Nyborg, 2010). These challenges make the work of grass-roots level conservation efforts difficult to manage and hence the country largely relies on a mixture of government and non-governmental/ international

organizations to undertake such conservation efforts, the largest and most active being CENGO.

CENGO, is a transnational network of over 100 conservation NGOs working across the world, with an autonomous country level office in Pakistan. They have several offices across the country consisting of project offices, regional offices and a head office. The organization has several different projects ongoing at any one time across a range of different themes across the country. Their 2020 annual report suggest they currently have forty-three projects across 8 different conservation areas. Many of these projects were being undertaken with some form of community involvement, whilst some had the specific purpose of creating sustainable development and livelihoods. CBO creation is the primary method used by CENGO to conduct their CBC commitments. The organizational makeup and structure of CBOs are entirely dependent on the specifics of the project. The CBOs typically have 25 to 40 members and 5 to 8 office bearers. Most of these CBOs are currently located in rural or village areas, though they are established in both urban and rural areas. The CBOs may be created as official organizations, some of which are subsequently registered, or they may be unofficial village-level arrangements. This is dependent on the project's scope, available funding, and the CBO's designated role. As part of a given project, more than one CBO may be created, and these CBOs may combine formal and informal organizational structures.

Data Collection Process

The findings presented in this article were derived from data collected using open-ended interviews, informal conversations and observations, and documentary evidence collected from 2017 through 2020. To begin, we conducted a series of interviews with members of staff at the NGO, spanning a wide range of organizational levels and taking place in a variety of settings. This included personnel from offices based in Karachi, Islamabad and Lahore. One of the authors oversaw conducting many of the interviews, and the other author participated in some of the conversations but not others. Both authors can converse fluently in Urdu and interviewees were free to speak in whichever language they felt comfortable. Some of the interviews were carried out in Urdu; in this instance, the interviews were transcribed into English first before being subjected to analysis. The length of the interviews ranged anywhere from 25 to 96 min. All the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Extensive notes were taken during each interview, and those notes were followed by additional notes written up on the same day.

The interview was structured as a conversation rather than a question-and-answer session (Shah, 2004). This was done to put the interviewees at ease during the process. The

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[2] In our context we consider the 'movement' to be the work of CENGO in generating support for the wider conservation social movement at grass-roots levels.

Table 1 Formal interviews

Code	Interviewee	Duration (min)	Interview date
1	Manager Program A	96	04-12-17
2	Manager Program B	71	04-12-17
3	Manager Sindh Region	76	05-12-17
4	Manager Corporate Partnerships	79	06-12-17
5	Manager Program C	38	06-12-17
6	Manager Program D	77	11-12-17
7		65	08-08-18
8	Senior Project Officer—Program E	62	11-12-17
9		49	08-08-18
10		15	10-08-18
11	Head of Monitoring	46	12-12-17
12		48	09-08-18
13	Head of Program Development	60	12-12-17
14		32	09-08-18
15	Head of Communication and Marketing	55	13-12-17
16		25	07-08-18
17	CEO	40	14-12-17
18	Advisory Council Member A	57	14-12-17
19	Advisory Council Member B	50	15-12-17
20	Head of Operations	46	06-08-18
21	Head of Regional Strategy	36	07-08-18
22	Board Member	35	09-08-18
23	Manager Program E	58	10-08-18

formal interviews are broken down in Table 1, which provides an overview of the process.

The specific objective of the interviews was to gain insight into the processes by which CBC initiatives are conceived, as well as to learn about the perspectives and experiences of those who were actively involved in the process. During the course of the interviews, the questions were modified in response to the emergence of new themes (O'Dwyer, 2004). The main questions asked across all interviews are presented in Appendix A.

In addition to interviews with NGOs, we also travelled to various CBOs across their different projects to see the work being undertaken. This access was facilitated by the NGO, who provided us with a list of projects currently ongoing and put us in touch with local staff/social mobilisers engaged with the different projects. We had multiple informal conversations with different community members around how they viewed the intervention of the NGO, how they felt the project was going, community involvement in the projects, level of decision-making and any other issues they wanted to mention. These conversations were kept deliberately informal as the researchers were mindful of potential for a power imbalance between researchers and vulnerable groups (Shaw et al., 2020). We wanted the community members to speak freely and of their accord. In order to, preserve the anonymity of the individuals involved, we have refrained from establishing a direct connection between the projects

and community members, since this could potentially lead to their identification.

The data was analyzed continuously throughout the entirety of the period in which they were collected. In the beginning stages of the data collection process, we made the decision to avoid being guided by any theoretical framework and instead keep the process deliberately iterative. This is in line with what Gioia et al. (2013) and O'Dwyer (2004) found, namely that standardizing the interview protocol would prevent the development of new themes and concepts. During this period, relevant categories began to emerge in relation to the importance of development work, social class structures, the engagement of stakeholder groups, barriers to women's participation, and the significance of local elites. After finishing the work in the field, the transcripts of the interviews, the field notes, and any other pertinent documentation were compiled into a research log. All interview data was triangulated with project reports, donor reports and additional observational evidence. After that, our goal was to apply the problematization process to the empirical data that we had collected (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). This method of analysis enables a conversation to take place between theory, existing literature, and empirical material. We wanted to find any propositions in the previous literature on CBC and mobilization that would challenge pre-understandings and expectations, so we carried out the analysis and collection phases in an iterative manner (Llewellyn, 1996; O'Dwyer,

2004) These themes were revisited and redrafted several times to refine their descriptive and theoretically important suppositions.

Discussion of Findings

We now present our findings. Here we seek to shed light on the culturally atoned participation strategies employed by environmental NGOs when engaging with their respective communities and in doing so, show how they recognize and navigate local power dynamics. This section delves into the nuances of how social dynamics influence participation and provides insight into CENGO's context-specific mobilization strategies. It then focuses on a critique of participatory interventions related to issues of gender inclusion and the sustainability of initiatives.

Social Dynamics of Participation

Across the NGO, there was an explicit recognition of the significance of understanding social dynamics and securing support for all projects that incorporate or have an impact on local people and communities on the ground. As interviewees stated, "*We can compromise on the money, but we cannot compromise on the interests of the people*" [3], and "*The involvement of the community is critical to the success of our projects"* [21].

This was deemed especially crucial considering the potential for project activities to affect livelihoods. In this regard, community mobilization occurs early in the project planning process, and is incorporated into the "*work plan and budgets*" [2]. These mobilization meetings are organized by local field offices staffed by locals. This is especially important given the remoteness of some regions, as well as the country's vast cultural diversity. The specific purpose of stakeholder engagement exercises during the project's inception stage is to understand the 'ground-level' challenges before substantial activities are created, as an interviewee stated: "*For every project, we do a stakeholder mapping. Then we determine which stakeholders have influence at what level"* [23].

This involves speaking to local people on the ground to understand the current community/social class/*biradari* structures as well as getting data on species, wildlife and terrain etc. from experts in the field. Both an understanding of social structures and environmental considerations thus happen in parallel. This is an important finding; whilst prior literature discusses the importance of understanding community needs in terms of project parameters for effective mobilization (Tai, 2007) less is known about how NGOs map local social structures to aid project mobilization. Project managers for example highlighted how

analyzing the level of influence and the level of autonomy of community stakeholders was very important. Here the NGO staff must attempt to understand the localized *biradari* networks and map the relative importance of these ties as part of the project planning. This understanding is important in helping decide the level of mobilization needed and if additional assistance or resources are required:

> There are also strong biradari relations. So a number of the people who are from one caste/biradari, might say we are serving our brother and they feel pride that they are having a voice among them and they have bharosa in them. [21]

This concept of '*bharosa'* (trust) was found to be a vital concept discussed by a number of interviewees. *Bharosa,* we find is not merely an abstract concept but a foundational pillar that ensures the cohesion and functioning of *biradari*-based participation. NGO members discussed how communities need to have *bharosa* in the NGO, their plans and their motives. Here, interviewees discussed engaging 'social mobilizers'; to building *bharosa* and making inroads with communities. If the NGO feels they need additional support in helping understand the needs of the community, or if they feel they do not have the requisite expertise (in terms of understanding the local culture, language or *biradari* situation), then they hire people familiar with the local issues, to directly engage with the community. Often these social mobilizers are either members of the community the NGO seeks to mobilize or have extensive experience of dealing with them. As a social mobilizer explains his task:

> We try and get them aligned with us, first get them to understand what we are going to achieve, what would be the impact, what would be the benefit and the loses to you and your community.

Another important step in gaining the '*bharosa*' of the community is for the NGO to identify the key 'influential' who either holds decision making authority or is regarded as a more knowledgeable voice for their community. In this regard, some prior research suggests CBC practitioners discuss CBC design with influentials out of convenience (Mansuri & Rao, 2004), we find these discussions are pivotal in building trust with communities at the outset. In Pakistan, given the cultural context, this influential is often a man and can be a political, religious or tribal head. A senior manager aptly described this situation:

> In communities you cannot really start working until you take the community elders and decision makers on board. We may say one thing so many times but nobody listens, however it is much easier if the village head says the same thing. [2]

In all instances, the process of engagement with these gatekeepers is not straight forward. With issues relating to gatekeepers not wanting development to take place, to those who wanted to push a particular agenda. For example, NGO staff stated: *"They have their personal interests and they do not want any development to take place and this effects social mobilization"* [12], and *"They were just pushing us to install the filtration plant within their own premises"* [10].

This has implications for how, if at all, CBC can take place, as well as the initiative's success or failure. Elite domination may be inevitable in community participation projects, where the elites are often leaders who embody political and moral authority. Often these elites are the only ones who can effectively communicate with outsiders, read project documents, and keep accounts and records. Here Rao and Ibanez (2003) remind us that that elite domination is not always elite capture. As a result, given the nature of Pakistani culture and society, it was clear that the NGO staff felt they had little alternative but to interact with the *biradari* and localised power structures if they wanted to engage with CBC. Working outside of the *biradari* system and power structures to engage communities was noted to be unachievable. Consequently, the success and ongoing participation of projects is dependent on the detailed pre-project planning undertaken by the NGO to understand kinship structures and the elites, and then to utilise these structures within their mobilization efforts:

> Our social mobilizers who went there and collected information basically spoke to them about what are the underlying values of that social set up and based on the underlying values, we determined which of these pillars or figureheads were best suited for leading this work in this area. [14]

The Role of Key Local Actors for Mobilization

The need to gain the *bharosa* of communities, and the ground realities of the Pakistani *biradari* system, mean the NGO has developed different participatory strategies targeted at different sections of society based on important influentials identified during the pre-project planning stage. Whereas current academic discourse emphasises the critical role of gatekeepers in facilitating participation, our investigation reveals subtle yet significant differences in pathways to involvement and the degrees of sway wielded by different gatekeepers within the same national tapestry.

Mobilization Through Landed Elites

Arguably the most important work the NGO undertakes is in its rural communities. At the village level the *biradari* structure play both an implicit and explicit role in the way daily life is carried out and the NGO integrates this understanding into the design of its community collaborations. Much of these implicit and explicit social structures are post-colonial remnants, the effects of which pervade the whole of the rural parts of the country to different extents. For instance, the Pakistani agrarian economy is dominated by a small number of landowners (*zamindar*), who, being the major sources of employment in the village, continue to hold enormous economic power in the countryside (Javid, 2011). Historically, the ability to control cultivators and stake claim to the product of the land formed the basis of political authority in rural South-East Asia during the Mughal and subsequent eras (Lieven, 2011). At the local and regional levels, political power was inextricably linked to land ownership and was bolstered by the fact that land ownership was frequently accompanied by significant prestige and loyalty from village- and regional-level familial groups (Javid, 2011).

NGO workers spoke of having to navigate these intricate village *biradari* structures when engaging local communities:

> You know the imam would be more effective in a more religiously motivated community and village elders or lambardar would be more influential in a rural setting where people have that tradition of following… [10]
> We first understand what the existing social system is, who is the senior person in the community, what are their internal issues. …. because if you want to work with the farmers, they are under the influence of their lambardars and the rest of their biradari. [21]

As reflected in these quotes, the village *lambardar* is an important figure in most (non-feudal/tribal) villages. The *lambardar* is often cited as the village headman or 'elder' who has connections to all people within the village. This is a hereditary role established by the British during the colonial rule. The original *lambardar* would have been selected from the dominant *zamindar biradari* in the village and given the responsibility of ensuring that all the members of the village who owned land met their revenue obligations to the state. This role still exists today although largely ceremonial, passed down from father to son. In a village setting therefore the *lambardar* has a tremendous amount of patronage (Javid, 2011).

In addition, the NGO cannot conduct any activities in feudal/tribal areas without dealing with the local landlords. Feudal landlords wield significant political power and patronage in Pakistan, holding more than two-thirds of the national assembly members and many key executive positions in the provinces (Shuja, 2007). In these areas, initiating and managing CBO initiatives can be much more difficult, and the direct involvement of local elites is critical for the projects to even begin; these elites hold much more power and resources than local village elders. For example,

in 2012, CENGO became involved in a long-term project working together with the Sherani tribe to overcome the effects of deforestation in the Chilgazi forest. The Sherani tribe is a conservative community with several branches and sub-branches that span two provinces and form a tribal confederation. The social structure is patriarchal, with tribal chiefs overseeing community decision-making. The NGO initially approached the tribe in 2009 to collaborate on a CBC project, but they were unable to reach an agreement. Following that, the NGO decided to take a tactical approach, and project staff began reaching out to communities through social mobilizers, who contacted individual tribal elders and religious leaders. Because the community's livelihoods were primarily dependent on the forests, agriculture, and livestock, social mobilizers helped tribal elders see how critical it was for the tribe's survival that CBC initiatives take place. Here the key role of the social mobilizers was to re-package the project in terms of benefit to the tribal chiefs. A social mobilizer stated:

> The community is now realizing the ecological importance of chilgoza forest, they are aware about the economic and environmental benefit of the forest, and now they are contributing to the conservation of chilgoza forests. That is the most important thing.

Utilizing Religious Figureheads

The NGO also actively uses religious institutions and figureheads in their mobilization efforts. These efforts are similar across the country, as religious structures and values play a significant role in both rural and urban Pakistan. This was reflected, for example, in NGO efforts to protect a specific type of endangered tree in the KPK province—the *Taxus wallichiana (Burmi).* The local community had used this tree for generations to build their graves and was slowly being eradicated. CENGO offered the community reinforced concrete slabs as an alternative, but it wasn't until the NGO brought in local mosque Imams that the community became more willing to consider alternatives:

> So, it was these religious leaders of the community who said you need to preserve nature, and partnered with CENGO, and said make sure that you don't use these trees. Those communities have actually stopped using that tree and we're able to take some steps for its conservation and then we've also provided them with an alternative to what they used. [13]

However, our findings also indicate that local religious leaders or Imams do not have influence beyond that of village heads: In these rural regions, the zamindar *biradari/ lambardar* wields influence over religious authorities. The imam's engagement in any initiative is normally at the request of the *lambardar,* and the specificity of the message is also confined to what the *lambardar/zamindar* wishes to be transmitted to the people. In other words, the final say stays with the *lambardar or zamindar biradari.* These findings contribute a nuanced perspective to the prevailing homogenous consensus that community mobilization in South Asia is primarily facilitated by religious leaders (UN-REDD, 2013). The results of our study indicate a more nuanced understanding.

In contrast, the use of religious figureheads in urban settings is much more upfront and a major mobilizing strategy throughout NGO projects. For example, a project manager noted they would use local religious leaders in inner cities areas due to the more traditional family structures followed by residents:

> So an imam will be more effective in an interior Lahore area where people follow traditions and their family values. So, if for instance, the head of the family is saying, you know, we need to go do this, every family member will follow. [3]

A project example relates to the work being undertaken by the NGO in inner city Lahore. This project is part of the NGOs freshwater strategy and in collaboration with a Beverages corporation, fifteen filtration plants were installed between 2015 and 2017 in low lying communities. The installation of these plants required extensive community level negotiation and creation of CBOs what would oversee the running of the plants. The NGO then engaged in a targeted mobilization campaign, which not only educated the local communities on the need for safe drinking water but also helped them set up CBOs to ensure the long-term sustainability of the filtration plants. Each location had a different population dynamic and a different social set up and so social mobilizers were recruited who went into each area to try and understand local needs. In some instances, the local spiritual leader was assigned the responsibility of overseeing the filtration plants and several of the plants were installed inside the local mosque compounds, which meant people were more careful with water usage:

> Some of the filtration plants were installed in the sacred places and the mosque, they also went well because people used to respect that area and because we also needed that operator. So the imam must was trained how to operate that filtration plant. [7]

In another project linked to fresh water and sanitation in the twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad, we observed that the NGO actively used local religious leaders to mobilize their respective congregations. A CBO member stated: *"The Imam is usually more influential in conveying the message to the community".* Even local politicians appear to be aware of the religious leaders' strength, with one adding:

"if there is any issue, we go to the religious leader and ask them to solve the issue in light of religious teachings''. It is also worth noting that, in contrast to rural/village settings, the function of religious leaders appears to be considerably more relevant and entrenched in these urban 'poor' groups.

Working with Local Politicians

Another important influential the NGO actively engages with is the local politician. Here, the NGO must work with local councilors and in some cases local MPs too. In-fact, we observed the presence of local councillors (both current and former) in nearly all CBOs. Comprehending the interconnection between *biradari* structures and political influence is crucial for effective mobilization endeavors as is discerning the true locus of power. According to our findings, the political figure is usually from the *zamindar biradari*. If the local councilor comes from a different *biradari* (particularly the landless class), he (or, in rare cases, she) can only be elected with the support of the local *lambardar*. Because of the patronage provided to non-landed villagers by village elites, such politicians nevertheless lack a voice of their own and must rely on the patronage of the *lambardar* to launch activities or mobilize village support. Given that the *lambardar/zamindar biradari* controls the land structure (housing land/ alleyways/ grazing/ water wells), their power is largely unchallenged in rural areas.

These political gatekeepers can also be self-entrenched and manipulate to further their own agenda. For example, in a case involving a local politician, interviewees noted:

> I remember a case where one of the local politicians was very influential and he said to us 'I need certain interventions from the solar units, whatever I need", so we said, no, that will not be done. [20]
> If we are distributing solar panels somewhere it is probable that local politician/MP will be putting their people forward to get these first. [22]

These findings show that although the political gatekeeper is important in furthering NGO mobilization strategies, in rural settings the political hegemony rests with the *zamindar biradari*. Although it is sometimes true that members of subordinate classes obtain political patronage (Chatterjee, 2004), we find that they are unable to challenge the ingrained subordination and their efficacy remains limited.

In contrast, the urban society exhibits a greater degree of fragmentation, wherein each neighborhood comprises multiple communities whose land ownership rights are confined to their respective residential boundaries. Consequently, the absence of landed elites is observed, with community leadership roles predominantly assumed by either local councilors or religious figures. These individuals acquire their power by providing support to communities in addressing their diverse administrative challenges, ranging from supporting individuals in navigating local government agencies to facilitating contacts with educational institutions and the judicial system. Thus, the role of the local politician is much more important in urban areas. The NGO is aware of this and leverages this insight to mobilize people in these communities. As a social mobiliser states: "*politically affiliated people such as local councilors and chairman are well listened to in these community*".

In a similar vein, the local politicians are also aware of their own influence. For example, the head of the CBO in a Northern Punjab based project is a local councilor. He noted:

> I have political influence and I can get their matter resolved. There are so many issues that one has to keep an eye on, and for these reasons people respect and listen to me.

Another local councilor added:

> The people just do not listen and pay attention to anyone talking to them from the street, however when I talk to them they do listen and pay attention.

The culture of patronage, however, continues as these local politicians tend to favor their own people wherever possible. We witnessed this in one of the water and sanitation projects when a woman from the local area suggested favoritism in *"the location of the water plants and the choice of people selected for the rainwater harvesting system"*. In response, the social mobilizers seemed to be aware of this issue and suggested it would get resolved as the project grew and more houses became involved in the project. The nepotism itself was not addressed.

Despite mobilizing political figures, NGO staff were keen to point out that they remained a-political as an organization and do not have any political affiliations. They must work with all politicians across the spectrum and ensure they are also seen to be above politics. The CEO of CENGO described a situation a few years ago where they had involved a local politician in a project who then used this to shore up local support for his political campaign and won the election. The losing candidate blamed CENGO project staff for the loss and the next day he arrived with armed men and told everyone to "pack-up and leave". As a consequence, they are now much more sensitive to the potential implications of engaging politicians.

Evaluating the Impact of Participatory Conservation Efforts

Navigating Gender Dynamics for Inclusive Conservation Participation

Pakistan is a very patriarchal society and women are among the most marginalized members of society (Moghadam, 1992), and so, enabling women participation can be a challenge for the organization:

> Our society is gender sensitive. Donor asks for women involvement in almost all projects and ensuring women participation especially in rural and tribal areas is a challenge. [11]

Like most NGOs operating in Pakistan, CENGO must gain the approval of (male) gatekeepers to ensure the inclusion of women in their CBC initiatives. They accomplish this by presenting issues specific to women that can only be resolved by women participants. In the *Ayubia* National Park project for example, project staff here explained how they met with community elders and persuaded them that to prevent illegal logging of endangered species, they needed to interact with the women and learn how they collected fuelwood for cooking. The agreement involved ensuring a good representation of women staff and researchers on site to make the women more comfortable. This ensured access remained open from the gatekeepers:

> If you have a good relationship with tribal elders or village elders, you can try and negotiate on things, you know, we bring in women staff or women social mobilizers, try to obviously be sensitive to their local customs. [13]

Similar strategies were also employed with the Sherani tribe. The area is one of the most conservative regions of Pakistan, where outsiders have considerable difficulty interacting with women. However, by developing a relational dialogue with community elders and ensuring they took a considered approach, sensitive to the specific norms of the tribe, these barriers were significantly reduced. This allowed the NGO to establish women's groups in four villages. In contrast to Western norms of gender inclusion where women work with men on CBC initiatives, for mobilization in Pakistan the NGO also needs to create separate women only groups to ensure participation: *"Because of cultural norms, women are hesitant to attend meetings with men." [9]*

Therefore, in all situations, ensuring gender balanced mobilization required additional efforts on part of the NGO. In this sense there were additional social constrains and added an extra layer of obstacles to participation. Whilst prior literature finds men gatekeepers allow women participation if there is some return for the family or community (Baily, 2014), our research adds to this by showing how access to participation is only enabled when gatekeepers are assured participation was 'vital' (i.e. packaged as a women-only issue) and presented as 'non-threatening' to their way of life and existing social structures. In our case a return or benefit to the family and community was not a pre-requisite for participation.

Furthermore, distinct patterns of participation emerge, often dictated by entrenched sociocultural norms and local governance structures. In rural areas, the degree of women's involvement in CBOs is tightly regulated by the village *lambardar*. The women joining the CBOs would largely be from the zamindar *biradari*. Furthermore, positions of leadership within the CBOs would also typically favor the *zamindar* or landowning class, thereby maintaining the status quo and limiting opportunities for women from outside the *zamindar biradari* in CBC initiatives. This participation would be limited to the CBO itself with limited opportunities for decision-making within the wider project. We also observed that in some rural localities, women participation was viewed as an informal endeavor. For example, when asking a local *lambardar* in a farming community how they involve their women in decision making, he replied: "*They have a separate group, they are not part of the kisan bethak (farmers discussions).*" Upon asking how they are involved in the decision-making process, he said "*we discuss matters at home and this is how they are involved.*"

In urban settings, there is a more visible presence of women in CBOs, however, the influence of women in these urban CBOs is often limited when it comes to making substantial decisions regarding projects. While they may be active participants, there is evidence suggesting that their deliberations are, similarly to rural practices, relayed to male-dominated CBOs for final decisions.

Thus, while NGOs have made efforts to engage women through the "gatekeepers" of society by framing initiatives as women-specific issues, the actual level of women's participation within CBOs themselves is often moderated by these same gatekeepers. As a result, our data suggest that women's participation in CBOs is, first and foremost, ceremonial in nature, and second, limited to women from specific *baradaris*. In terms of the first point, this stands in contrast to earlier research, which posited that women were not only more involved in relevant issues but also took on more dynamic roles when engaging with CBOs (Baily, 2014; Sullivan, 2000). In terms of the latter point, this is an important finding as it suggests even when women are involved there is substantial bias in selection and involvement processes. Here practitioners need to be mindful that when engaging mobilization through social structures such as the *biradari* system, women are not excluded based on this kinship structure.

Challenges to Sustaining Conservation Initiatives

For the NGO, development work is not only embedded, but was also seen as a necessary part of doing conservation work in a developing country and consequently forms a key part of their strategy. NGO staff noted how through collaboration with the communities, their conservation initiatives had the potential to make a positive impact on improving human lives, with many describing their involvement as encompassing both conservation work and transformative change for individuals:

> Because there are so many development needs in play, poverty, sanitation, all that stuff. In developing countries we have realised that we need to focus quite a lot on sustainable development. [13]
> But we are not only working on the environment, you know poverty, environment nexus is always there, we are also working on a livelihood development. We are also working on skill development. [3]

Here we find by linking conservation goals to development goals, the NGO maintains a flexible understanding of what constitutes conservation. In doing so, the organization is able to account for both its own core goals and values (in relation to furthering conservation) and focus on beneficiary needs on the ground (which are usually tied to development). Consequently, CENGOs strategy places a heavy emphasis on creating sustainable partnerships and is closely aligned to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Given many of their funding comes from institutional funders, such as the UN & EU, their donors are also often keen to ensure a sustainability component is embedded into their projects.

As an example, the NGO became involved in installing safe drinking water pumps in an inner-city area of Lahore, arguably a development rather than conservation initiative. Here, local communities were facing water-borne diseases, due to leaks in the tap water pipelines supplied by the local water board. However, due to Pakistan's ineffective public sector, local governments were unable to address these issues. The NGO decided to get involved as part of their freshwater program, which focuses specifically on protecting and revitalizing rivers and wetlands "*that sustain people and nature while ensuring there is enough water for all of us*" (CENGO strategic priority). By linking this goal to the UNSDG goal of ensuring the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all, the NGO was able to expand the boundaries of what it considers conservation work for its own specific context (Benford & Snow, 2000).

At the same time, the reality of clan-based social structures frequently means that attempts at embedding sustainability into all projects is not always possible. For example, entrenched inequalities remain a pervasive challenge at ground-level in both rural and urban areas where local land elites and religious patriarchy perpetuate post-colonial hierarchies. This concentration of power often leads to political control by a select few, which in turn can foster nepotism (as outlined earlier) and further entrench disparities. Limited education and religious and patriarchal practises that capture certain groups, especially women, exacerbate these inequalities. To launch projects quickly, NGO utilize existing power structures, which can be expedient for short-term goals but may inadvertently reinforce the very inequalities that NGOs should be seeking to dismantle (Lehman, 2007; Srinivas, 2009).

Here the NGOs efforts to overcome these inequalities appear superficial and this has consequence for the viability of long-term project success once the NGO exits. For example, when specifically asked about this, an NGO manager responded: "*We are aware of this, however we do not have much choice. We have to go through these people and often listen to them to get something done.*"

Moreover, most NGO projects are time-bound, and there is an apparent lack of strategic planning for the continuity of benefits after the projects end. this short-term focus might align with organizational goals or funding cycles, but it overlooks the need for long-term solutions to deep-seated inequalities. There is an implicit recognition or perhaps a resignation within the organization that they cannot—or should not—tackle entrenched inequalities head-on, as doing so could render project initiation more complex or even infeasible. Addressing these issues requires a shift in how NGOs operate, rather than working within and thus perpetuating existing power dynamics, there is a need for a long-term commitment to transformative change that directly confronts and seeks to dismantle systemic inequalities. This might mean rethinking project design, implementation, and exit strategies (and funders willingness to fund such strategies) to ensure that interventions do not just offer temporary relief but contribute to lasting social change.

Conclusion, Contributions, and Avenues for Future Research

The aim of our paper was to critically appraise the role of an environmental NGO and the cultural and social mechanisms it leverages to foster participation in conservation initiatives. In doing so, we sought to provide a nuanced understanding of CBC, the ethics surrounding participation, and the pivotal role that environmental NGOs play in this milieu. By demonstrating how an environmental NGO embeds preexisting cultural/social structures into its participation endeavors, our research adds both a critical and a non-Western dimension to the discourse on the mobilization of CBC activities. While the motivation for engagement in social movements has

previously been addressed (Benford & Snow, 2000; Klandermans & Oegemas, 1987; Ward, 2016), empirical research documenting the preliminary measures critical for assuring the effectiveness of such participation remains lacking. Our findings highlight the importance of cultural and social frameworks in achieving both access and continuing support for participation, where NGOs must conduct extensive social mapping exercises in the early stages of community mobilization.

We find, engaging with community-led initiatives in Pakistan necessitates a profound understanding of the *biradari* system and the building of *bharosa* with influential members of the *biradari*. This dynamic adds a level of complexity to NGO accountability by suggesting that downward responsibility cannot be implemented solely by direct community involvement, as shown by earlier studies (Dewi et al., 2021, Yasmin et al., 2021). Rather, cultivating *bharosa* means gaining the backing of those who are considered important in the *biradari* hierarchy. Environmental NGOs therefore have to align themselves with these social structures. This emphasizes how important it is for NGO employees to have experience in dealing with community dynamics and ideally come from the same or similiar *biradari* to avoid exacerbating existing tensions or creating new ones. A novel finding here points to the importance of NGOs harnessing local knowledge not just in articulating project parameters (Goldman, 2003) but also in articulating NGO participation strategies.

We find community influentials serve as intermediaries enabling community participation and at the same time helping further NGO objectives. Here our research adds nuance to prior conservation research which either views the NGO itself as a gatekeeper or 'broker' for resources (Gili et al., 2020), or tends to homogenize the role and purpose of gatekeeping within the boundaries of 'elite capture' (Bardhan, 2002; Murphree, 2002; Platteau & Gaspart, 2003). In contrast, our study presents micro-level insight into community-level gatekeepers, highlighting how it is important for NGOs to understand power dynamics within these gatekeepers themselves to enable effective mobilization. In particular, we find in socio-economically deprived urban spaces, the gravitational pull of religious leaders is palpable. Here religious gatekeepers are acutely aware of their power and patronage and leverage this 'soft' power to help NGOs advance their projects. The absence of traditional land-centric hierarchies, which hold considerable sway in rural terrains, permits these religious figures to occupy a more central governance role and are thus given considerable prominence by the NGO in its mobilization activities. Contrastingly, the rural tableau is dominated by the landowning village elders, the

'*zamindars*.[3]' In these landscapes, religious leaders, despite their spiritual gravitas, and political leaders, often find themselves under the shadow of these *zamindar*s. This is a stark reflection of how the *biradari* system, more than spiritual status and political status, dictates power dynamics in Pakistan. Furthermore, this *biradari* system not only influences access but also extent of participation for women. In rural settings, both are controlled by men and limited to women from the *zamindar biradari,* whilst in urban domains the final decision-making still rests with the male gatekeepers.

A micro-mobilization lens, embedded within a social structural analysis, reveals that the participation of influentials and gatekeepers in NGO projects is not merely convenient, but essential as these influentials do more than enable initial participation (McAdam, 1986, 2000; Oegema & Klandermans, 1994); they are crucial for ongoing support. At the same time, these structures, often remnants of colonial governance, have been scrutinized for maintaining a status quo where marginalized populations remain oppressed (Hassan, 2011). The utilization of feudal, tribal, or religious elites as gatekeepers, while practical in the short term, may inadvertently sustain a hierarchical social order that community-based initiatives ostensibly seek to dismantle. As NGOs embed these structures into their projects without considering long-term consequences, there arises a need for introspection on the part of development practitioners regarding the inadvertent perpetuation of colonial legacies. However, we argue in contrast to prior literature (Buscher & Fletcher, 2019; Fletcher, 2012; Sullivan, 2000; Oomenn et al., 2019) that this does not negate the idea of CBC itself, despite the inherent power dynamics within these systems, participatory strategies in developing countries like Pakistan cannot be disentangled from these realities. We develop this point further in our contributions.

Contributions

We place our contributions in three main bodies of literature. First, our paper enriches the complex narrative surrounding CBC effectiveness by navigating the divergent viewpoints found in the conservation literature. While acknowledging the potential benefits of CBCs identified by Agrawal and Gibson (1999) and Tai (2007), our research critically engages with the challenges and unintended consequences spotlighted by Buscher and Fletcher (2019; 2020), Fletcher (2012), Sullivan (2000, 2006), and Oomenn et al. (2019). By doing so, it contributes a multifaceted understanding of CBC outcomes that neither dismisses the model outright nor

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[3] Their authority isn't just a product of tradition but is deeply rooted in tangible assets—control over land, including essential community spaces such as alleyways, grazing zones, and water sources.

overlooks its substantial challenges. The incorporation of a '*biradari*'-based analysis offers a nuanced understanding of how kinship and social stratification shape the effectiveness of CBC. This approach responds to the literature that posits CBCs' vulnerability to local politics and elite dominance (Bardhan, 2002; Murphree, 2002; Platteau & Gaspart, 2003; Songorwa, 1999). By situating '*biradari*' within these debates, our paper highlights how cultural dimensions of power can influence conservation outcomes and the distribution of responsibilities within communities.

Additionally, our findings contribute to the discussion of CBC's conceptual and practical viability (Fletcher, 2012; Oommen et al., 2019; Redford et al., 2013). Here our study demonstrates how understanding '*biradari*' networks can shed light on the potential pitfalls of CBC initiatives, thereby addressing the concerns raised by Fletcher et al. (2016) and Redford and Sanderson (2000) about the integrity of CBC. Our research directly engages with the deep critiques of power dynamics within CBC frameworks (Massarella et al., 2018, 2020), by not only recognizing these dynamics but also by delineating how they operate at the grassroots level. The paper's exploration of '*biradar*i' and its impact on CBC provides critical insights into how these conservation and development paradigms operate in practice, highlighting the importance of cultural considerations in the design and implementation of interventions. This contribution is not only theoretically significant but also has practical implications, offering a pathway to more culturally informed and effective conservation practices that can address the complex challenges highlighted in the existing literature.

Secondly our paper contributes both to our understanding of the framing work involved in constructing NGO accountabilities (Dhanani & Connolly, 2015; Gray et al., 2006) and also to the growing NGO work looking at downward accountability (Dewi et al., 2021; O'Dwyer & Boomsma, 2015; Uddin & Belal, 2019). We argue that NGOs working in contested and negotiated terrains, such as those related to conservation can and should engage in boundary shifting of their core objectives to be accountable to the communities with which they interact on the ground. For example, CENGO engages in frame extension[4] (Benford & Snow, 2000) by rethinking the concepts of environmentalism and conservation at the grassroots level. This enables CENGO to repurpose its own role by broadening the parameters of the term "conservation" to include development that is beneficial to the local communities. As a result, we counter researchers (Fletcher, 2012; Oommen et al., 2019; Redford

et al., 2013; Tai, 2007) who suggest priority should be given to conservation rather than development efforts.

In addition, our research provides a more nuanced understanding of the operationalization of downward accountability. Prior NGO literature (Dewi et al., 2021; Uddin & Belal, 2019), views downward accountability and beneficiary centric accountability of NGOs as the ability to engage directly with beneficiaries, there is little understanding of how this can be enabled. Our research sheds light on the nuanced grassroots work that NGOs must undertake to enable such downward accountability to work in practice. Here the role of gatekeepers in negotiating downward accountability is a novel insight that our research adds to the literature. Whilst prior literature demonstrates how various forms of NGO accountability can interact in a holistic, co-constructed, or adaptive manner (O'Dwyer & Boomsma, 2015; O'Dwyer & Unerman, 2008), our findings extend this understanding to show that accountability at the grassroots level, particularly in contested arenas, is a nebulous concept open to negotiation and rooted in local cultural dynamics.

Finally, our research contributes to the micro-mobilization literature (Beyerlein & Hipp, 2006; McAdam, 1986; Oegema & Klandermans, 1994) by enriching our understanding of participation dynamics within specific contexts. We go beyond the concept of participation and provide empirical evidence on the factors that lead to sustained mobilization. We present evidence not only of the methods through which support is mobilized but also how this support is sustained within social structures, advancing beyond the scope of previous studies in the field (McAdam & Paulsen, 1993; Passy & Guigni, 2001; Snow et al., 1980). By examining social structures through a culturally-sensitive lens, our study enhances the prevailing analyses in the literature by illustrating the critical role such structures play in non-Western mobilization. By acknowledging these elements, our study responds to calls by McAdam (2000) to shed light on the vital cultural dimensions that influence the efficacy of mobilization strategies and participation in diverse sociocultural arenas.

Avenues for Future Research

Building on these findings, future research could explore additional contexts where grassroots ethical realities must be managed, expanded, or bridged (Benford & Snow, 2000) to effect meaningful change. Our study contributes to the mobilization literature by underscoring the need for more situational and context-specific analyses to better understand how participation and movements translate across different contexts, especially in developing nations where movements are not often grassroots-driven. Future research could thus view community-based initiatives or beneficiary accountability initiatives as multi-stakeholder scenarios, where various

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[4] According to Benford and Snow (2000), frame extension refers to instances when organizations/movements go beyond their primary interests to include issues and concerns that are presumed to be of importance to potential adherents. In other words, they broaden their scope.

actors contest different claims and entitlements. This approach provides an opportunity to scrutinize the roles played by different stakeholders, the saliency of various accountabilities, and the impact of socio-economic conditions on the delivery and development of conservation initiatives.

Appendix A

Themes of interview questions with CENGO staff

Below are a couple of questions asked within each theme. These were deliberately kept open-ended and non-leading. These were then followed up with further probing questions depending on the answer given:

Theme 1: Understanding and implementing community-based conservation.

Questions in this theme explored the NGO understands and implements CBC, focusing on their general approaches, experiences, and perceptions:

- Can you describe CENGO's general approach to conservation and community development projects?
- What are some key considerations you keep in mind while planning and implementing these projects?

Theme 2: Influence of cultural and social structures.

This theme delves into how cultural and social structures within communities are understood and engaged.

- How do you/CENGO facilitate community participation in your projects?
- Can you share any experiences where local cultural or social aspects significantly influenced a project?

Theme 3: Participation, power dynamics, and accountability.

This theme focuses on participation in projects, the role of local power dynamics, and how accountability is maintained.

- What approaches do you take to navigate and work with local power dynamics?
- How do you remain accountable to your core conservation goals?

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Ethical Approval Approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the University of Manchester. The procedures used in this study adhere to the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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