Journal of Media Horizons
ISSN: 2710-4060 2710-4052 Volume 7, Issue 3, 2026

UNDERSTANDING COUNTERTERRORISM FROM THE FRONT LINE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF CTD PRACTITIONERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PAKISTAN'S NATIONAL ACTION PLAN IN DISTRICT SWAT

Mr. Hassan Shah[1], Dr. Ihsan Ullah Khan[*2], Dr. Azizullah Jan[3], Mss. Hanifa Bibi[4]

[1]*MPhil Scholar Sociology, Department of Social and Gender Studies, University of Swat*
[*2]*Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Swat*
[3]*Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Chitral*
[4]*MPhil Scholar Sociology, University of Chitral*

[1]hassansociologist727@gmail.com, [*2]ihsanullah@uswat.edu.pk, [3]aziz.jan@uoch.edu.pk, [4]janhanifa30@gmail.com

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20179315

Keywords
National Action Plan; Counter Terrorism Department; Swat; phenomenology; qualitative research; counterterrorism governance; practitioners; legitimacy; deradicalization; Pakistan

Article History
Received: 16 January 2026
Accepted: 25 February 2026
Published: 13 March 2026

Corresponding Author: *
Dr. Ihsan Ullah Khan

Abstract
This paper examines how frontline counterterrorism practitioners in District Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, understand, interpret, and evaluate Pakistan's National Action Plan (NAP). Employing a phenomenological qualitative design, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirteen Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) officers using purposive sampling. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis. Findings reveal that practitioners hold a nuanced, multidimensional understanding of NAP that goes far beyond its operational dimensions. Participants consistently recognized NAP as a transformative strategic framework that resolved long-standing institutional fragmentation, unified counterterrorism governance, strengthened CTD capacity through improved training and equipment, and articulated an ideological response to radicalization. Participants also identified NAP's role in restoring public trust by making the state's presence visible and credible after years of militant dominance. Their accounts further linked NAP's objectives to underlying socioeconomic drivers of extremism, such as unemployment, poverty, and lack of education, demonstrating a sociologically informed understanding of terrorism and its prevention. These findings contribute to the sociology of security governance by documenting the lived professional understanding of NAP among those who operationalize it, revealing the meanings, priorities, and frameworks that shape on-the-ground counterterrorism practice in a post-conflict setting.

1. INTRODUCTION

Pakistan's National Action Plan (NAP), launched in December 2014 in the immediate aftermath of the Army Public School (APS) massacre in Peshawar, represents the most comprehensive national counterterrorism framework in the country's history. Agreed upon through a rare moment of cross-party, civil-military consensus, NAP articulated twenty priority areas for dismantling militant networks, countering extremist ideologies, reforming security institutions, and restoring the writ of the state in conflict-affected regions. Seven years later, a revised and expanded NAP 2021 updated these commitments in response to emerging challenges,

including digital radicalization, sectarian violence, and the return of battle-hardened militants from abroad.

Academic scholarship on NAP has grown considerably since 2014, yet it remains disproportionately focused on macro-level analyses: evaluations of national security outcomes, legislative reforms, aggregate crime statistics, and formal implementation records (Rana, 2019; Khan, 2021; Ullah, Khan, & Marwat, 2024). This body of literature, while valuable, leaves largely unexamined the perspectives of those who translate national policy into local counterterrorism practice. The men and women of the Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) Pakistan's primary civilian agency responsible for implementing NAP occupy this critical translation space. Their interpretations of what NAP means, what it seeks to achieve, and how it has shaped their work are not merely professional opinions; they are the cognitive and institutional infrastructure through which a national policy becomes operational reality.

This paper addresses this gap by presenting findings from phenomenological interviews conducted with thirteen CTD officers in District Swat, a territory that experienced one of the most intense periods of militant governance and military counterinsurgency in Pakistan's recent history. The study from a qualitative thematic analysis that explored practitioners' understandings, perceptions, and lived experiences of NAP. Specifically, this paper examines: how CTD officers understand and articulate the objectives of NAP; what dimensions of the plan they prioritize and why; and how their understandings reflect broader sociological, institutional, and ideological sensibilities about terrorism and its prevention. The findings have significance beyond Swat. As counterterrorism scholars increasingly recognize the importance of implementation-level analysis and street-level bureaucracy (Lipsky, 1980; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984), studying how practitioners understand the policies they enact becomes essential for explaining both the successes and limits of national frameworks. This paper contributes to that agenda by documenting practitioner understanding of NAP as a multidimensional, contested, and sociologically rich phenomenon.

1.1 Objectives

- To document how frontline CTD officers in Swat understand the origins, objectives, and strategic logic of NAP.
- To examine which dimensions of NAP practitioners emphasize operational, ideological, institutional, or socioeconomic and to explore the reasoning behind those emphases.
- To analyze how practitioners' understandings of NAP are informed by sociological, criminological, and institutional frameworks.

1.2 Research Question

- How do frontline CTD practitioners in District Swat understand, interpret, and conceptualize the objectives and significance of Pakistan's National Action Plan (NAP)?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Pakistan's Counterterrorism Landscape and the Emergence of NAP

The context in which NAP emerged was shaped by three decades of escalating political violence. Saeed, Syed, and Martin (2014) trace terrorism in Pakistan through three distinct phases: the Afghan Jihad era of the 1980s, which introduced weapons, militants, and sectarian networks; the 1990s, dominated by ethnic and sectarian violence particularly in Karachi; and the post-9/11 period, characterized by suicide bombings, TTP insurgency, and the northward shift of violence into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). This evolving landscape created a security environment in which fragmented, reactive responses proved progressively insufficient. District Swat offers a particularly acute local illustration of this national trajectory. Multiple studies document the Taliban's rise in Swat through a three-phase process: the exploitation of judicial grievances and governance vacuums in the mid-2000s through the promise of Sharia-based swift justice; intense military operations (Operation Rah-e-Rast, 2009)

that displaced up to two million people; and a prolonged post-conflict reconstruction phase marked by hybrid institutions, lingering institutional weaknesses, and unresolved social fragmentation (Shah et al., 2020; Nyborg & Nawab, 2021; Elahi, 2015; Malik, 2015). Understanding NAP in Swat requires situating it within this layered local history. NAP itself emerged from a rare moment of political cohesion. Rana (2019) describes the APS attack as producing a national shock that temporarily suspended the political divisions and civil-military tensions that had previously blocked comprehensive security reform. Building on earlier frameworks including the National Internal Security Policy (NISP) and operations such as Zarb-e-Azb. NAP represented Pakistan's first attempt to institutionalize counterterrorism across civilian, military, and provincial domains under a single, politically endorsed framework.

2.2 Practitioner Perspectives and Street-Level Bureaucracy

Despite the growing volume of NAP scholarship, the perspectives of frontline implementers remain almost entirely absent from the literature. This represents a significant gap because, as Lipsky (1980) argues in his foundational work on street-level bureaucracy, front-line workers do not merely apply policies; they interpret, adapt, prioritize, and reshape them in ways that profoundly influence outcomes. The discretion exercised by CTD officers in determining which threats to pursue, which communities to engage, and how to frame their interventions is not incidental to policy implementation it is its operational core. Studies of practitioner understanding in counterterrorism contexts elsewhere confirm the analytic value of this focus. Research on counter-radicalization practitioners in the United Kingdom found that front-line workers held substantively different understandings of radicalization than policymakers, with significant implications for program design and community relations (Thomas, 2010). Similarly, studies of police counterterrorism units in France and Germany identified how organizational culture, professional socialization, and local context shaped practitioners' interpretations of national directives (Bauer & Gorzig, 2020). In Pakistan, equivalent practitioner-focused inquiry has been largely absent.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

This paper is theoretically anchored in two complementary frameworks that illuminate how practitioners understand NAP and why their understanding matters for security outcomes.

Beetham's (1991) Legitimacy Theory provides the first frame. Beetham argues that power and governance are legitimate not simply because people believe them to be so, but because they satisfy three interdependent criteria: conformity with established rules (legal validity), justification through shared beliefs (normative legitimacy), and expressed consent from those subject to authority. Applied to NAP, this framework directs attention to whether practitioners perceive the plan as legally valid, normatively justified, and genuinely endorsed by the communities it is meant to protect. Their interpretations of NAP's legitimacy directly shape how they enact it and whether communities trust and cooperate with the institutions that implement it.

Policy Implementation Theory, developed by Pressman and Wildavsky (1984), provides the second frame. Their central insight that even well-designed policies face cascading implementation failures as they pass through multiple institutional actors and decision points — helps explain why practitioners' understandings of NAP are analytically critical. If front-line implementers do not share an accurate or comprehensive understanding of NAP's objectives, its provisions will be inconsistently applied, its potential will be unrealized, and its outcomes will diverge from its designers' intentions. Conversely, practitioners who hold rich, multidimensional understandings are better positioned to adapt NAP's provisions intelligently to local conditions.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

This paper employs a qualitative phenomenological design under an interpretivist research philosophy. Phenomenology, as a

research tradition, prioritizes the exploration of lived experience and the meanings that individuals construct from their encounters with social phenomena (Rasid, Djafar, & Santoso, 2021). This approach was selected because the central research question asks not what NAP has achieved in objective terms, but how practitioners experience, interpret, and understand it a fundamentally interpretive inquiry.

3.2 Study Setting

The study was conducted in District Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Swat was selected as the research site because of its unique historical significance as a territory that experienced both extreme militant governance and intensive counterterrorism intervention, making it an analytically rich context for examining how practitioners understand the implementation of NAP. The Counter Terrorism Department (CTD) office in Swat, with a total staff of 143 personnel across various ranks, served as the institutional setting for data collection.

3.3 Participants and Sampling

Thirteen CTD officers were selected through purposive sampling, a non-probability technique appropriate for phenomenological inquiry because it ensures that participants are directly positioned to speak to the research question (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The sample included officers from a range of ranks from inspector to sub-inspector and ASI levels to capture both strategic and operational dimensions of practitioners' experience. This sample size is consistent with phenomenological guidelines, which recommend between five and thirty-one participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Guetterman et al., 2015). Data saturation guided the final sample size, with recruitment continuing until no new themes emerged.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, a method appropriate for phenomenological inquiry because it allows for rich, open-ended exploration of participants' experiences while maintaining sufficient structure to ensure coverage of key analytic themes (Bryman, 2012). Given the sensitive nature of the research setting and CTD protocols, audio and video recording was not permitted. All data were collected through detailed handwritten notes taken during interviews. Participants' identities are protected through the use of pseudonyms throughout this paper. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were assured that their contributions would be used solely for academic purposes.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through thematic analysis, a method for systematically identifying, analyzing, and interpreting recurring patterns of meaning within qualitative data (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Analysis followed a six-phase process: familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. This paper presents findings from Theme 1 of the larger analysis, which captured practitioners' foundational understanding of NAP across five sub-dimensions: institutional unification, preventive orientation, ideological awareness, capacity building, and socioeconomic consciousness.

3.6 Reflexivity and Limitations

The researcher acknowledges that the sensitive institutional context of the CTD, including security protocols that prevented recording, may have introduced some constraint on participants' willingness to speak freely about certain aspects of their experience. The reliance on handwritten notes introduces a degree of interpretation in transcription that would not apply to verbatim recordings. These limitations are inherent to research in restricted institutional settings and are addressed through careful, transparent reporting of findings.

4. FINDINGS

Thematic analysis of interviews with CTD practitioners produced five interconnected sub-themes that collectively constitute practitioners' understanding of NAP. These sub-themes move from the most immediately operational

understanding NAP as a unifying institutional strategy through ideological, capacity-related, socioeconomic, and trust-related dimensions. Taken together, they reveal a rich, layered practitioner understanding that extends well beyond the formal text of the policy document.

4.1 NAP as a Unifying Institutional Strategy: Breaking the Silo

The most consistently articulated dimension of practitioners' understanding of NAP was its role in resolving the fragmentation that had historically characterized Pakistan's counterterrorism response. Before NAP, participants described a security environment defined by institutional silos, unclear mandates, and the absence of coordinated direction. NAP was understood as the structural solution to this fragmentation.

"To bring all forces together against terrorism. Before NAP, every department was doing work in its own way. There was no proper direction or joint planning. With NAP, we finally had clear guidelines and full support from the government to take action without hesitation." **CTD Officer (Participant 1)**

The participant's account reveals that practitioners experienced pre-NAP counterterrorism not simply as technically inefficient but as politically uncertain a system in which authority was ambiguous and institutional backing was inconsistent. The phrase 'full support from the government' signals that NAP resolved not only operational fragmentation but also the political ambivalence that had previously inhibited decisive action. This is significant: the participant implies that earlier institutional failures were not merely organizational but also stemmed from the absence of political commitment. This interpretation aligns closely with Rana's (2019) assessment that NAP represented Pakistan's first genuine attempt to institutionalize counterterrorism through cross-party, civil-military consensus. The literature similarly identifies fragmented authority structures and inconsistent political backing as among the primary factors that undermined Pakistan's counterterrorism performance before 2014 (Ahmed, 2020; Ullah, Khan, & Marwat, 2024). The participant's understanding therefore reflects an accurate sociological reading of the pre-NAP structural environment.

A second participant articulated NAP's unifying function in terms of strategic coherence rather than political consensus:

"NAP provided a roadmap to ensure terrorism can't rise again. It was not only about reacting to attacks; it was about stopping terrorism completely so that it has no chance to come back. That roadmap helped us follow one direction instead of working blindly." **CTD Officer (Participant 2)**

The metaphor of a 'roadmap' is analytically revealing. It frames NAP not as a reactive emergency measure but as a structured strategic architecture, a guide for sustained, forward-looking action. This understanding reflects Pressman and Wildavsky's (1984) insight that effective policy implementation depends on clear chains of decision, shared direction, and institutional continuity. The participant's sense that pre-NAP work was 'working blindly' captures precisely the kind of institutional drift that implementation theory predicts when policy frameworks are absent or unclear.

A third participant framed NAP's unifying significance in terms of national solidarity rather than institutional design:

"NAP was introduced after the APS incident to give a strong message that terrorism will not be tolerated at any cost. It was a turning point. The whole nation was united, and the state had to show seriousness. NAP became that message." **CTD Officer (Participant 3)**

This interpretation introduces a symbolic and political dimension absent from the previous accounts. For this participant, NAP's primary significance was as a communicative act a demonstration of state resolve directed simultaneously at militant actors and at a traumatized public. This understanding resonates with legitimacy theory: Beetham (1991) argues that expressed state commitment and visible demonstration of authority are essential for sustaining political legitimacy, particularly during crises. NAP, in this reading, was as much a performance of state capacity as an operational plan.

4.2 NAP as a Preventive Framework: From Reaction to Anticipation

A second major dimension of practitioners' understanding involved recognizing NAP as a fundamentally preventive, rather than reactive, framework, a shift in strategic orientation that participants felt profoundly in their daily work.

One officer articulated this shift in terms of the temporal logic of counterterrorism:

"NAP was not only about reacting to attacks; it was about stopping terrorism completely so that it has no chance to come back." **CTD Officer (Participant 2)**

The emphasis on preventing recurrence rather than responding to incidents reflects an understanding consistent with academic scholarship that identifies preventive counterterrorism targeting root causes, disrupting recruitment pipelines, and building institutional resilience as more durable than reactive approaches (Lum et al., 2006; Renard, 2021). The participant's understanding mirrors what scholars call a 'whole-of-society' approach, in which security institutions function not simply as responders to violence but as proactive architects of a stable social environment.

Another participant connected NAP's preventive logic to the institutional upgrading of CTD:

"For us in CTD, operations became more targeted and effective after NAP. We moved from reacting after incidents to preventing them before they happen." **CTD Officer (Participant 4)**

This account illustrates how NAP's preventive orientation was not merely an abstract policy commitment but a lived operational shift. The transition from reaction to prevention represents a profound change in professional practice one that requires different skills (intelligence analysis, pattern recognition, community engagement) from those demanded by reactive response (crisis management, pursuit, detention). The participant's recognition of this shift suggests a sophisticated understanding of what preventive security governance requires.

4.3 Ideological Awareness: Understanding Terrorism Beyond Force

Perhaps the most analytically significant dimension of practitioners' understanding was their recognition that terrorism is fundamentally an ideological and communicative phenomenon, not merely a security or logistical one. Multiple participants demonstrated a nuanced awareness of how extremist narratives function and why NAP's attention to ideology was essential.

"NAP focused on monitoring sermons, controlling hate material, and stopping extremist propaganda. Militants don't always use guns; they use words to influence people. NAP tried to break that influence." **CTD Officer (Participant 5)**

This participant's insight that extremism operates through language and narrative as much as through violence reflects a conceptual sophistication that challenges simplified security-centric models of counterterrorism. By distinguishing between armed coercion ('guns') and ideological persuasion ('words'), the participant articulates an understanding consistent with research on the communicative dimensions of radicalization (Shah et al., 2020; Khan & Pratt, 2022). His interpretation acknowledges that dismantling militant networks without addressing the ideas they propagate leaves the conditions for resurgence intact. The strategic use of propaganda and religious messaging in Swat is well documented in the literature. Shah et al. (2020) show that militants used FM radio broadcasts, sermons, and public communications to impose social norms, gain recruits, and legitimize their parallel governance. Malik (2015) demonstrates how Taliban forces in Swat initially attracted support through ideological promises of swift justice before their narrative turned coercive. The participant's recognition of these dynamics as a central target of NAP reflects an empirically grounded understanding of the local history of extremism.

A second participant reflected on the temporal complexity of ideological change:

"Changing mindsets takes time. You can catch a militant today but you cannot change someone's thinking in a day. But NAP started that process by highlighting the need to work on narratives." **CTD Officer (Participant 6)**

The distinction drawn here between arresting individuals and transforming belief systems is sociologically important. The participant implies

an understanding that recidivism and re-radicalization are possible even after successful operations, because the underlying cognitive and emotional framework that produced the initial commitment to militancy may persist. This understanding aligns with research on deradicalization, which consistently identifies the complexity and non-linearity of ideological change as among the primary challenges facing rehabilitation programs (Fair & Hamza, 2020; Bashir & Cremin, 2019).

A third participant extended this ideological awareness to the specific vulnerability of youth:

"Youth are the most vulnerable to extremist influence if they have no guidance or opportunities." **CTD Officer (Participant 7)**

This brief but revealing statement captures a core finding from radicalization research: that young people facing unemployment, identity uncertainty, and lack of positive social structures are disproportionately susceptible to extremist recruitment (Sial, 2020; Yousaf, 2020). The participant's framing connects NAP's youth-focused provisions to an understanding of the psychosocial mechanisms through which radicalization operates showing that practitioners do not simply apply policy directives but actively connect those directives to their understanding of why terrorism happens.

4.4 Institutional and Capacity Dimensions: Professionalization of the CTD

Practitioners consistently identified institutional capacity-building as a central dimension of their understanding of NAP's significance. Their accounts reveal that NAP was experienced not only as a policy framework but as a transformation of professional identity and operational capability.

"NAP strengthened CTD with better training, equipment, weapons, and modern investigation systems. Before this, CTD did not have the kind of resources or authority it has today." **CTD Officer (Participant 8)**

The participant's enumeration of specific improvements training, equipment, weapons, investigation systems grounds the abstract language of 'institutional reform' in concrete professional experience. His reference to 'authority' is particularly significant: it suggests that NAP's contribution to CTD was not only material but jurisdictional, clarifying the department's mandate and expanding its operational autonomy. This interpretation aligns with scholarship documenting that CTD professionalization was among NAP's most tangible contributions to Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's security architecture (Rana, 2019; Abbas, 2021).

A second participant articulated the procedural dimension of this transformation:

"Now we work more professionally. There are proper supervision, regular reporting, and accountability." **CTD Officer (Participant 2)**

The shift from informal, discretionary policing to documented, supervised, accountable practice represents a fundamental change in organizational culture. In pre-NAP counterterrorism environments, what Ibrahim et al. (2025) describe as 'thana culture' characterized by irregular FIR registration, corruption, and personalized authority was widespread in KPK policing institutions. The participant's pride in reporting, supervision, and accountability signals awareness that institutional culture has shifted, and that this shift is experienced as professionally significant. This understanding has implications for legitimacy: when officers internalize accountability as a professional norm rather than an external constraint, the institutions they represent become more credible to the communities they serve.

A third participant emphasized the coordination dimension:

"Coordination improved and orders were clear, no confusion like before." **CTD Officer (Participant 9)**

This observation captures the reduction in what Pressman and Wildavsky (1984) call 'clearance points' the decision nodes at which fragmented institutions must agree before action can proceed. In the pre-NAP environment, multiple agencies with overlapping mandates and inconsistent communication created confusion that militants could exploit. Clear coordination, defined roles, and streamlined communication reduced these institutional vulnerabilities and enabled faster, more effective response.

4.5 Socioeconomic Consciousness: Recognizing the Structural Roots of Terrorism

A final and particularly significant dimension of practitioners' understanding was their recognition that terrorism is not simply a security phenomenon but a social and economic one — rooted in structural conditions of poverty, unemployment, and educational exclusion. This socioeconomic consciousness represents a sociological awareness that extends well beyond the technical mandate of frontline security work.

"Militancy does not grow in a vacuum. It comes from unemployment, poverty, and lack of awareness." **CTD Officer (Participant 10)**

The participant's framing that militancy is structurally produced rather than individual resonates with foundational sociological explanations of crime and deviance. His understanding implicitly challenges purely militaristic counterterrorism approaches by recognizing that force alone cannot address the conditions from which extremism emerges. This interpretation aligns with global radicalization research linking economic marginalization and social exclusion to vulnerability to extremist recruitment (Yousaf, 2020; Ali & Bibi, 2020).

In the specific context of Swat, the socioeconomic dimensions of militancy have been extensively documented. Studies show that militant groups were able to present themselves as providers of economic opportunity, social belonging, and purpose to young men who found no comparable alternatives in legitimate institutions (Sial, 2020). The participant's understanding reflects awareness of precisely this dynamic and by extension, an implicit argument that sustainable counterterrorism must engage socioeconomic conditions alongside security operations.

A second participant connected this structural understanding to specific programmatic implications:

"Youth programs and education are important so young people don't fall into extremist influence." **CTD Officer (Participant 7)**

By identifying youth programs and education as counterterrorism tools, the participant frames prevention as fundamentally developmental a view consistent with international scholarship arguing that durable counterterrorism must integrate security, social, and economic dimensions (Rana, 2019; UNDP, 2020). The participant's understanding implies a criticism of NAP's implementation, which other participants also articulated, that NAP's social and economic provisions have been implemented less consistently than its security components.

A third participant raised the implementation gap directly:

"More still needs to be done, implementation is slow. Without development, the problem can return." **CTD Officer (Participant 11)**

This warning about recurrence captures a fundamental insight in counterterrorism scholarship: that security gains achieved through force are reversible if the underlying structural conditions that produced extremism remain unaddressed (Wahab, 2021; Rahman, Sadiq, & Shah, 2023). The participant's concern is not abstract; it reflects direct professional experience of communities where economic distress persists even as militant activity has declined and where that distress represents a continuing vulnerability.

4.6 Restoring Public Trust: The Sociological Function of Visible State Authority

Running across all five sub-themes was a deeper understanding that NAP's significance ultimately lay in its contribution to restoring the social contract between the state and communities in Swat. Participants recognized that institutional reform, ideological intervention, and capacity-building were all, at some level, in service of a more fundamental goal: rebuilding public confidence in the state's ability and willingness to protect.

"People saw the government was finally serious. After years of fear, they felt hope again." **CTD Officer (Participant 12)**

The concept of state 'seriousness' invoked here maps closely onto Beetham's (1991) dimension of expressed consent and normative legitimacy. The participant implies that communities had come to doubt the state's commitment not its legal authority, but its genuine willingness to act and that NAP's implementation restored that belief. Hope, in this reading, is not merely an emotional

response but a social indicator of perceived legitimacy.

"People noticed changes on the ground more patrols, stricter checks, and better coordination. This made them feel protected." **CTD Officer (Participant 13)**

This participant highlights the sociological mechanism through which trust is rebuilt: visible, consistent, credible institutional presence. In post-conflict settings, where communities have experienced the withdrawal or failure of state institutions, the return of visible security is experienced as both practically protective and symbolically significant. Nyborg and Nawab's (2021) research on Swat similarly documents how communities judged the state's legitimacy not through formal institutions but through the everyday quality of security provision and institutional responsiveness.

"When markets opened and schools felt safe again, people believed peace had returned." **CTD Officer (Participant 12)**

This account moves the understanding of NAP's significance beyond counterterrorism metrics attack frequencies, arrests, network disruptions into the realm of social life. Markets and schools represent the restoration of ordinary, civilian-controlled public space after militant occupation. Their reopening signals not merely the absence of violence but the positive presence of stability, normalcy, and civic life. This is precisely what legitimacy theorists mean when they describe the 'expressed consent' dimension of legitimate authority: communities signal acceptance of state governance through participation in its institutions and public life.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings presented above reveal a practitioner understanding of NAP that is substantially richer, more multidimensional, and more sociologically sophisticated than what official policy documents or aggregate security metrics could capture. Across all five sub-themes, CTD officers in Swat demonstrated not only familiarity with NAP's provisions but a reflective understanding of why those provisions matters, what social and institutional conditions they are designed to address, and where their implementation remains incomplete.

This has theoretical implications for both legitimacy theory and implementation theory. From a legitimacy perspective, practitioners' understanding of NAP closely tracks all three of Beetham's (1991) dimensions. The recognition of NAP as legally valid established through formal political consensus and articulated in clear institutional directives was universal. The recognition of NAP as normatively justified as a response to genuine security failures and structural vulnerabilities was also consistent across participants, though it was most clearly expressed in the socioeconomic and ideological sub-themes. The dimension of expressed consent — the sense that communities have come to trust and cooperate with the state's counterterrorism institutions — was articulated through the public trust sub-theme, with participants linking institutional credibility to visible, consistent, fair practice.

From an implementation perspective, the findings illustrate the Pressman-Wildavsky paradox in productive reverse: where implementation theory identifies how good policies fail through institutional complexity, the Swat case shows how practitioners' rich understanding of a policy's multidimensional objectives can enable more adaptive, context-sensitive implementation. Officers who understand NAP as simultaneously operational, ideological, institutional, and developmental are better equipped to recognize when strict operational approaches are insufficient, and to supplement them with community-oriented or preventive interventions.

The findings also contribute to the sociology of security governance by documenting how institutional culture the professional norms, expectations, and assumptions that shape daily police work has shifted under NAP. The repeated emphasis on professionalism, accountability, coordination, and prevention reflects a transformation not only in what CTD officers do but in how they understand their role. This cultural shift is analytically important because, as Lipsky (1980) argues, street-level bureaucrats' professional identity shapes their discretionary

behavior as much as formal policy rules. When practitioners identify with a professional ethos of accountability and prevention, they are more likely to apply NAP's provisions in ways consistent with its broader objectives.

The socioeconomic consciousness expressed by participants deserves particular attention. The recognition that militancy 'does not grow in a vacuum' that it is produced by structural conditions of poverty, exclusion, and lack of opportunity represents a sociologically informed understanding of terrorism that many formal counterterrorism frameworks do not fully acknowledge. That this understanding is held by frontline CTD officers suggests that the implementation gap in NAP's social and economic provisions is not simply a matter of resource scarcity or political will; it is also a professionally recognized problem among those tasked with managing its consequences. Practitioners' warnings about recurrence if development gaps are not addressed carry weight precisely because they are grounded in direct observation of communities where security has improved but structural vulnerabilities persist.

6. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This paper has examined how frontline CTD practitioners in District Swat understand Pakistan's National Action Plan across five interconnected dimensions: institutional unification, preventive orientation, ideological awareness, capacity-building, and socioeconomic consciousness. The findings reveal a practitioner community whose understanding of NAP is simultaneously operational and sociological, technical and philosophical encompassing both the immediate mechanics of counterterrorism work and a reflective awareness of the structural and ideological conditions that produce the threats they confront.

The central contribution of this paper is its documentation of practitioner understanding as a sociologically significant phenomenon in its own right. The way CTD officers understand NAP shapes how they implement it; how they implement it shapes how communities experience it; and how communities experience it determines whether the institutional trust that NAP seeks to rebuild is actually restored. Understanding the chain of interpretation that connects national policy to lived community experience requires attending carefully to the practitioners who occupy its critical middle point.

The findings also point to an important gap between what practitioners understand NAP to require including serious, sustained investment in youth development, employment, education, and community engagement and what the plan has delivered in these areas. Multiple participants warned that without addressing the structural roots of extremism, security gains risk reversal. These warnings, grounded in professional observation and sociological awareness, constitute an important form of practitioner knowledge that policymakers would benefit from incorporating into NAP review and revision processes.

6.1 Policy Recommendations

- Create formal mechanisms for frontline CTD practitioners to feed implementation experiences and community observations back into national NAP review processes, ensuring policy adaptation is grounded in practitioner and community knowledge.
- Invest in sustained, adequately funded youth employment, educational, and psychosocial programs in post-conflict districts, addressing the structural conditions that practitioners themselves identify as the foundational drivers of extremism.
- Institutionalize counter-narrative and digital counter-radicalization training within CTD professional development, ensuring that ideological dimensions of counterterrorism receive the same systematic attention as operational and forensic skills.
- Develop district-level monitoring and evaluation frameworks for NAP implementation that capture practitioner and community perspectives alongside formal security metrics, enabling a more complete and adaptive assessment of policy effectiveness.

6.2 Directions for Future Research

Future research should extend this practitioner-focused inquiry across multiple districts and provinces to examine whether the multidimensional understanding of NAP identified in Swat is shared more broadly, or whether local histories and institutional cultures produce divergent practitioner interpretations. Comparative research examining CTD practitioners' understandings alongside those of other stakeholders including community members, rehabilitated former militants, and local government officials would provide a fuller picture of how NAP is understood across the social landscape of post-conflict Pakistan. Longitudinal studies tracking how practitioner understandings evolve over successive iterations of NAP would also contribute significantly to the evidence base for adaptive policy design.

REFERENCES

Abbas, M. (2024). Neither friend nor foe: exploring potential development impacts of Pakistan's community policing practice (Doctoral dissertation, RMIT University).

Ahmed, S. S. (2020). The Role of Pakistan Against Counter Terrorism. American Scientific Research Journal for Engineering, Technology, and Sciences (ASRJETS), 65(1), 66-81.

Ali, A., & Bibi, C. (2020). Public policies, socio-economic environment and crimes in Pakistan: A time series analysis. Journal of Public Policy and Administration, 4(1), 1-15.

Bauer, L. H., & Gorzig, C. (2020). Localizing scientific advice: The role of terrorism research in German state policymaking. Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 43(11), 991-1010.

Bashir, L., & Cremin, H. (2019). Deradicalization in post-conflict settings: Lessons from Pakistan. Journal of Peacebuilding & Development, 14(2), 1-14.

Beetham, D. (1991). The legitimation of power (Issues in political theory). Red Globe Press.

Bryman, A. (2012). Social research methods (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Clarke, V., & Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. The Journal of Positive Psychology, 12(3), 297-298.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Elahi, N. (2015). Militancy, conflicts and displacement in Swat Valley of Pakistan: Analysis of transformation of social and cultural network. International Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 5(3), 226-235.

Fair, C. C. (2018). In their own words: Understanding Lashkar-e-Tayyaba. Oxford University Press.

Fair, C. C., & Hamza, A. (2020). Deradicalization in Pakistan: Programs, practices, and prospects. Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel, 13(4), 22-29.

Guetterman, T. C., Fetters, M. D., & Creswell, J. W. (2015). Integrating quantitative and qualitative results in health science mixed methods research through joint displays. The Annals of Family Medicine, 13(6), 554–561.

Ibrahim, K., Khurshaid, K., Riaz Ahmad, & Hussain, M. (2025). Patterns of violations among police and their impact on policing in District Swat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan: A sociological analysis. Review Journal of Social Psychology & Social Works, 3(1), 730-739.

Khan, M. F. (2021). Causes and impacts of terrorism in Swat Valley (2007-2017). Pakistan Journal of International Affairs, 4(1), 768-792.

Khan, M. K., & Pratt, C. B. (2022). Strategic communications: The Pakistan military's use of social media against terrorism. Media, War & Conflict, 15(4), 450-485.

Lipsky, M. (1980). Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services. Russell Sage Foundation.

Lum, C., Kennedy, L. W., & Sherley, A. J. (2006). The effectiveness of counter-terrorism strategies: Campbell systematic review summary. Campbell Systematic Reviews, 2(1), 1-50.

Malik, S. (2015). Use of force and fear in the rise of the Taliban in Swat: A case study. Journal of Contemporary Studies, 4(2), 17-30.

Nyborg, I. L. P., & Nawab, B. (2021). Civil security in the wake of crisis: Renegotiating police–community relations in post-crisis development in Swat, Pakistan. Journal of Human Security, 16(2), 134-148.

Pressman, J. L., & Wildavsky, A. (1984). Implementation: How great expectations in Washington are dashed in Oakland (3rd ed.). University of California Press.

Rahman, H., Sadiq, A., & Shah, S. A. (2023). Resurgence and response: Evaluating the effectiveness of Pakistan's counter-terrorism strategies amidst rising terrorism threats. Pakistan Journal of Social Research, 5(4), 24-37.

Rana, M. A. (2019). The national action plan: Policy perspectives. Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies.

Rasid, R., Djafar, H., & Santoso, B. (2021). Alfred Schutz's perspective in phenomenology approach: Concepts, characteristics, methods and examples. International Journal of Educational Research & Social Sciences, 2(1), 190-201.

Renard, T. (2021). Counter-terrorism as a public policy. Perspectives on Terrorism, 15(4), 2-10.

Saeed, L., Syed, S. H., & Martin, R. P. (2014). Historical patterns of terrorism in Pakistan. Defense & Security Analysis, 30(3), 209-229.

Shah, Q. A., Nawab, B., Nyborg, I., & Elahi, N. (2020). The narrative of militancy: A case study of Swat, Pakistan. Journal of Human Security, 16(2), 55-65.

Sial, S. (2020). Radicalization and youth vulnerability in Pakistan's conflict-affected regions. Pakistan Institute for Peace Studies Monograph.

Thomas, P. (2010). Failed and friendless: The UK's 'Preventing Violent Extremism' programme. The British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 12(3), 442–458.

UNDP. (2020). Human development report 2020: The next frontier Human development and the Anthropocene. United Nations Development Programme.

Ullah, W., Khan, S. R., & Marwat, I. U. K. (2024). Coordination between federal and provincial governments in implementing the National Action Plan (NAP): Challenges and successes. The Lighthouse Journal of Social Sciences, 3(2), 14-31.

Wahab, F. (2021). Effectiveness and consequences of counterterrorism strategies in Pakistan: A critical appraisal of National Action Plan. Unpublished manuscript.

Yousaf, F. (2020). Pakistan's tribal areas and the governance vacuum: Insurgency, militancy and policy responses. Third World Quarterly, 41(9), 1-18.