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**Development Alternatives: NGO-  
Government Partnership in Pakistan**

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# Development Alternatives: NGO-Government partnership in Pakistan

Jennifer Bennett

*The author explores Pakistan's rural development projects and the promotion of rain-fed agriculture by the successful cooperation among government, local communities and NGOs working for sustainable livelihoods. Collective empowerment has been fostered by local initiatives, motivating the creation of Community Organizations and Women's Organizations, implementing saving-credit schemes based on a participatory process, and mobilizing the community in the development of managerial abilities.*

## Pakistan: A Spotted History of Economic and Political Development

In a span of five decades of its inception, Pakistan's history has experienced many convoluted political and economic development changes. On the political front, the country saw through frequent changes in governments, including three martial laws. From 1985 to the present, there have been 10 governments in a period of only 7 years. A more stable factor in this period, however, has been the economic growth, averaging a respectable rate of well over 5 per cent. Despite that, Pakistan is amongst the few countries where the gap between economic growth and human resource development is widening. Literacy and health levels are amongst the lowest in the world, while unemployment and underemployment have increased to over 13-15 per cent (Kamal, 1995). More than 30 per cent of the population now lives in poverty, rising sharply from 20 per cent in 1990 (Mahbub ul Haq, 1997), while inequality in income distribution has worsened to 7.8 from 5.5 since 1987 (Government of Pakistan, 1997).

## Agrarian Politics in Pakistan

One of the important factors connected with disparities in social and economic development is failure of much needed land reforms. Pakistan is basically an agrarian country, and livelihoods of the majority of the population is still dependent on agriculture. Most of the agricultural land is under the control of a few landlords who have resisted land reforms, and will continue to fight to keep intact their social power and economic prosperity. Social development, whether it be education or economic well-being of a village family, is considered a threat which may eventually undermine their position of power. Resistance to land reform by land holders is supported at the national level as they occupy key positions in the state bureaucracy. Ironically, these political leaders are elected through the support of the same suppressed and deprived members of their constituencies.

Poor farmers, with fragmented and unproductive landholdings, are not in a position to afford relatively intensive and advanced agricultural techniques to optimize yield outputs. A few state-led rural development programs were initiated in support of these farmers, but - not surprisingly - they ended up benefiting only the big farmers and landlords who had access to sources of power and patronage.

In the midst of government's failure to deliver assistance to small farmers, growing disparities and deteriorating human condition have been addressed by various Non-Government Organizations (NGOs). These NGOs launched different working systems of socioeconomic development, especially in rural areas, on

the basis of two key criteria: that responsibility for all aspects of development program should be shared by local people and institutions; and a decentralized organizational structure is one of the most effective means of facilitating this.

## **The Role of NGOs in Pakistan Agrarian Development**

Over the past one decade or so, the number of NGOs has increased to over 10,000. Some 4000 of these are currently working on development issues. The Rural Support Programs (RSPs) are amongst the most outstanding examples of professionally managed development programs being run by NGOs today. The Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP) was the front runner among the rural support programs and its success led to the replication of its community participation model in other support programs. All the rural support programs are in some way patterned on the AKRSP approach. A successful collaboration between the Government of Pakistan, GOP/Donors/NGOs was laid, in large measure, by AKRSP through its successful demonstration of the manner in which community based village organizations were encouraged to facilitate the task of development in Northern Pakistan. This approach was then used by the Balochistan Rural Support Program (BRSP) in Balochistan province, the Sarhad Rural Support Corporation (SRSC) in North West Frontier Province (NWFP), the Sindh Rural Support Program (SRSP) in the province of Sindh, and the National Rural Support Program (NRSP) at the national level. Each of these NGOs were funded by a donor and may not have been possible without their support.

Under a similar tripartite arrangement, the Barani Area Development Project (BADP) was initiated in NWFP in 1993, and is, perhaps, the largest area development project in Pakistan. It covers more than four districts and aims to achieve sustainability by linking government agencies to community organizations through an NGO, the Sarhad Rural Support Corporation. The project was funded by the Asian Development Bank. The following story is based on a case-study conducted in the five villages of Kohat district, where rural development uplift program activities under BADP are currently ongoing.

### **Story Telling**

BADP was initiated in response to lack of government-support to the diverse needs of barani, that is, rain-fed agriculture. Being a mountainous area with limited alternative sources of livelihood, people are largely dependent on agricultural production. In the absence of frequent rains, modern technology and easy access to markets consistent with poorly managed irrigation systems, cultivation is difficult and production extremely inadequate. The situation is worse for 58 per cent of the population who possess relatively small landholdings. Many times, production is not even enough for their own household consumption. Such a situation has forced the young and energetic out of the villages to the cities where they often occupy under-paid jobs.

In line with the needs of the people, the specific aims of the BADP were then to promote the productive capacity of rainfed agriculture and resources by: developing and demonstrating integrated technology packages to improve agricultural productivity and natural resources management for a wide range of agro-ecological conditions; expanding and improving rural infrastructure; strengthening the institutional capacity to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate barani development programs; and, involving the rural population in the planning and implementation of project activities. Although BADP is patterned on the AKRSP model, an important difference in the two programs is the greater emphasis of the BADP on the work of the government line departments in partnership with an NGO and community organizations for streamlining multisectoral activities. This arrangement is likely to be more sustainable as demonstrated in some areas where BADP

activities are quite mature. With continuous contact and time, the government personnel and the villagers would have established links which would outlive the project duration.

### **Project activities**

The project activities are carried out through the implementation of nine major components: institutional development; village level development; agricultural research; agricultural extension; horticultural extension; livestock production extension; forestry and range; rural credit; and rural infrastructure. The two founding pillars of the program, however, are the productive investments and the savings and credit schemes which are envisioned to gear the community members to a sustainable path.

The base for implementing any project activity, like in other RSP models, is premised on formation of community-based organizations. In each village, cooperating household members are motivated to form one or more Community Organizations (COs) and Women's Organizations (WOs). These organizations are created on the commitment that each member pools some amount of money, depending on individual capacity, to start a joint account. Each organization maintains its own savings pool. A member of each organization is democratically elected to register account of every member on a monthly basis. The ultimate objective of savings is to develop, through an evolutionary process, the community's own credit pool, for catering to the credit needs of providing collateral to banks. Member-savings also provide eligibility to the credit facilities offered by the project. This is a very strong incentive to participate, and this program component has generated numerous alternative sources of income. Using credit facilities, women, in particular, have started various micro-enterprises like poultry and livestock rearing, kitchen gardening, and fruit plantation.

Equally important, the saving-credit scheme is a way to mobilize the community, after which collective undertakings are carried out to implement other important productive and capacity-building components. The first undertaking is a Productive Investment (PI) which aims to improve the village infrastructure, such as, road, irrigation channels, drinking water-supply schemes, dug wells, lift irrigation, *inter alia*. The PI is so structured that it should benefit all members, increase productivity, must be sustainable and can be operated and maintained by the village itself. The decision to engage in a PI is taken in a participatory process, with the consent of all members. A prerequisite preceding implementation is to form a PI committee, constituting committee members, elected by members. Their responsibilities include, monitoring progress, handling finances and other record-keeping. The PI committee is also encouraged to create a pool-fund for maintenance and repairs. Overall, the PI cost is borne collectively with the understanding that the members contribute roughly 25 per cent, in the form of unskilled labour and raw material, the remainder being provided by SRSC.

Natural resource management is another important program-component for enhancing productivity. Simple but effective technologies are introduced in agriculture like new seeds for high yielding crops, quality livestock and fodder, and improved forestry techniques for countering deforestation, overgrazing and desertification even in marginal and waste lands. Examples in agriculture show that introducing seeds like sunflower, soybean and vegetables are viable alternative crops, especially during lean periods and have added to in-house food security. With improved techniques, villagers were able to cultivate another crop, between the two crop seasons. Farmers had also started to market excess produce locally.

This is reinforced by the human resource development component which aims to improve the skills of villagers, through their own resources, with the assistance of the line departments, and by conducting training programs. An important aspect of the intervention strategy is to continuously mobilize the community and develop managerial abilities. This aims to enable the community and manage their daily affairs rather than

depending on state employees. Thus, a cadre of community extension workers is created who serve to link the villagers with the line departments for carrying out different activities within the community. Through them a trust is built between the communities and the line departments. They are the main source of transfer of technology and inputs to the community.

The act of institutional strengthening within the village communities has strengthened the capacity of the villagers to deal effectively with many other social problems not covered by the project. Some of the independent decisions taken in this context include the imposition of a complete ban on the cutting of fuel wood and other trees, livestock grazing at the nearby common mountains, aerial firing, sale and purchase of addictive drugs, and gambling. Forceful application of such decisions has resulted in paying a fine by the offender or a complete social boycott by the rest of the community members. Earlier on, many day-to day social problems were difficult to tackle in absence of an organized forum for collective decision-making.

### **Increasing the Impact**

Many lessons can be learnt from this example of local initiatives in Pakistan. Foremost, and contrary to the government's centralized approach to development planning, the success of the program pivoted on the tight link with the community and the flexibility in using new working methods adaptive to integral needs of each community. With minimal organizational structure, the community was able to form its system of settlements with its physical infrastructure and its social and economic organizations. These local initiatives clearly demonstrate that local processes of collective empowerment, based on self-reliance, are a powerful tool for social transformation. They also show that people play a crucial role in the maintenance of livelihoods, cultural continuity, and community cohesiveness, and that people's perspectives are integral to the formulation of new modes of sustainability.

More importantly, the partnership created between the local communities, NGOs and the local government was crucial in attempting to bridge the existing gaps and building new bridges of solidarity. It infused development thinking and practice with a shift in focus from the enterprise to the community, specifying strengthened interactive process for development. With positive results of different local experiences, the challenge is to build and replicate local action into a basic political tool for mainstream development initiatives which are viable and relevant to the world system.

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