

LARGEST WORKING FOR THE POOREST: A Case of Rural Support Program (RSP) in Pakistan

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Abstract

The paper examines what Pakistan, at national level is harnessing to develop the human resource capability, through participative approach by National Rural Support Program¹ (NRSP). The program provides an analogy to the Participatory Action Research methodology as the development for the rural demands the involvement from the rural community by NRSP.

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan has been long time struggling to develop an endogenous knowledge system, which particularly is able to disseminate the knowledge in the society and be able to bring up the large rural part of Pakistan in performance, which is almost 60 percent of the total population of nearly 160 millions.

The problems of the rural poor in Pakistan are countless. When we list down the problems; they are many as well as complex in nature, including low production, low prices, low incomes, low wages, meager savings and unemployment due to which the rural populace struggle day by day to fight against the never ending abyss of debt and destitution.

In addition, over-population is leading to pressure on the capacity of natural resources, upon which the livelihood of the rural poor depends. Many millions live in abject poverty, marginalized from the mainstream and often hidden from the public eye. Apparently, the rural poor have no hope to improve their quality of life.

An objective analysis of the rural poor has indicated that they are not a homogenous group but are differentiated with respect to socio-economic conditions, agro-ecological situations and religio-cultural patterns. They

¹ National Rural Support Program (NRSP) is a non-governmental organization, which is further divided into provinces, districts and cities, funded by national and international donor agencies. It SHOULD NOT be misunderstood as a 'National or Government Owned' organization or program on the base of its name.

also have certain commonalties such as; landlessness or small subsistence holding, isolation from the main economy, unorganized and leaderless, lack capital and have no access to credit, and lack of marketable skills.

The late Dr. Akhter Hameed Khan, an eminent development scholar of international fame called this the peasant mentality. In his view the poor in the sub-continent are mainly subsidy oriented, look for doles, are fatalistic and follow factionalism. These characteristic elements essentially translated into lack of capacity of the rural poor to change their own lot. These are remediable defects, unlike the impression Brayne had, of the shortcomings of the villagers being irremediable.

Over the past decades, South Asian governments have taken various initiatives to create anti-poverty programmes. However, despite the allocation of large sums of capital and organizational effort, little seems to have been achieved on the ground. Following a development paradigm alien to the region, utilitarianism sectoral imbalances, conventional top-down strategies, ad-hocism, inequitable distribution of assets, inaccessibility to technological innovations and finance, lack of rural productive infrastructure, over-exploitation of natural resources, inadequate development of the social sector, the use of development resources as political patronage, and viewing the poor as a liability, therefore, to be shunned, ignored and disregarded. This obviously led to the exclusion of a large number of rural poor from benefiting out of the government initiated programmes, hence increasingly marginalizing them.

One of the solutions, proven already effective, is to pledge support and development through rural support program (RSP) for the sustainable livelihoods for the poor. Such program will help to develop the poor farmer, and villagers to practice the skills which they have learned through their own participation, with the help of the support program. However the efforts required from the rural support program may not be tangible if certain conditions like: stake holders involvement, interest, commitment, finances are not meant by certain stakeholder.

NATIONAL RURAL SUPPORT PROGRAM (NRSP)

Established in 1991, NRSP is the largest non-governmental Rural Support Programme in the country in terms of outreach, staff and development activities. NRSP's mandate is to alleviate poverty by harnessing people's potential and undertake development activities in Pakistan. Having presence in 32 Districts in all the four Provinces including Azad Jammu and Kashmir through Regional Offices and Field

Offices, NRSP is currently working with more than half a million poor households organized into a network of more than 29,000 Community Organizations. With sustained incremental growth, it is emerging as Pakistan's leading engine for poverty reduction and rural development.

The main areas of National Rural Support Program focus on a strategy which could ensure the rural population's involvement in addressing the challenging issues. Indeed the solutions come more prevalent and effective, once the community involvement is ensured. Such an approach is analogous to Participatory Action Research (PAR)² methodology which requires the active participation of the community under study to participate actively with the professional researcher throughout the research process from the initial design to the final presentation of results and discussions of their action implications. Particularly in NRSP's case, the role of the researcher is played by the social organizer and community workers. The social organizer minutely studies the case of the particular community, targeting the solution for the community, for the problems (identified in: Introduction) and make a follow-up after implementing the solution to the problem.

HOW DOES IT WORK

The willing community is introduced to the philosophy of NRSP, based on which the community organizes itself into a socially viable group called the Community Organization (CO). In view of the information provided by the poverty profile, an attempt is made to encourage the poor to join the CO.

Relying on local perceptions, a poverty profile is prepared to assess the intensity of poverty prevailing in the community that seeks social guidance. During initial interactions with the community, genuine activists, who have an ambition to support their communities in their quest to overcome poverty, are identified. The role of these activists in harnessing the willingness of the communities is of paramount significance.

Following the identification of an activist, a micro plan for each member is developed to see what he or she is willing to do on his/her own. Along with catering to the individual needs, group level and village level needs are also identified. A thorough analysis of each is conducted in view of available resources and constraints to assign priorities to the identified needs.

² Adapted from book title 'Participatory Action Research' by William Foote Whyte

The next step after the cost-benefit analysis is the arrangement of the desired resources to address the priority needs. These resources are pooled by the community, provided by the support organization or managed through other stakeholders like private and public sector service delivery departments, NGOs and donors.

One solution, held for many decades, to the problem of small scale farm operation is collectivization of the kind implemented in China and the former Soviet Union. The other one practiced in the capitalist world envisages rapid transformation of agriculture into a corporate system. Neither suited the rural poor of the Third World. A solution that is needed is one that preserved the private ownership of land; at the same time it called for pooling of resources and their cooperative management at the village level.

More specifically, it is felt that there is a dire need for combination of principles and implementation methods which have been employed successfully to organize the rural poor around their interests, and to service these rural organizations in a permanent and profitable manner.

The philosophy proposed for the working of NRSP is extracted from the experience of countries with flourishing small holder agricultural sectors. These are the principles of Raiffeissen used with success in the institutionally based development of German agriculture. The Japanese pursued the same principles. These principles of village organization were also adopted with successful results in Taiwan and by the Saemaul Undong movement in the Republic of South Korea.

In Pakistan, these ideas were first made the basis of a rural development effort by Dr. Akhter Hameed Khan, when he initiated the Comilla project in 1959, in what is now Bangladesh. These ideas have further been tested and proved to be successful by the implementation of integrated development through a participatory approach by the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) in the Northern Areas.

The lessons learnt from Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) proved that organization of the poor is the best means to alleviate poverty. The community participation in NRSP is broad-based and decentralized with homogenous organizations at the village and neighborhood level.

Broad-based and homogenous membership is extended to all the members and decision making is unanimous by all the members whose common economic interest is best served by working together. Decentralized participation meant that decision making is the responsibility of the local communities while supporting agencies, like

government and other development agencies provided technical and financial assistance, but did not infringe upon the sovereignty of the community organization. In other words, community participation ensured development of, for and by the people.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

The importance of a support mechanism for implementing the conceptual package is central. The programmes for the poor can only be effectively implemented if these are led by an autonomous support structure, committed to the creation of a participatory village level institutional framework. The traditional approach of establishing a large number of specialized agencies (for training, credit, input supplies and extension etc.) for reaching the poor has failed because they were hampered in their effectiveness by the absence of a strong and broad institutional base at the village level. Creation of a village level institutional framework does not fall in the purview of any of these agencies.

NRSP was therefore set up as a Rural Support Programme, which has taken the lead in the creation, promotion and support of effective and disciplined community organizations to manage rural development in Pakistan on a nationwide level. Wherever possible, existing or proposed organizations of the communities have also been used or incorporated into this effort provided that they were willing to operate in accordance with the principles and terms of partnership offered by NRSP.

CONCLUSIONS

While the spur of the globalization phenomenon, the national perspectives of the domains owe high degree of responsibility and liability towards the social and economic development of the society. In this particular context, the country requires a platform where to exercise the full potential of local knowledge available and its dissemination in the society as per the benefits of that society in which the knowledge exists. However, here an argument lies with the core that such knowledge should create a value and importance for the people of the society with a particular recognition, acknowledgement and appreciation from the same as well as other knowledge domains. Certainly, implicitly that is not implied that knowledge without such appreciation and acknowledgement lies no where for the society and hence should be, if possible discarded from the society itself, which is indeed not possible. Once the knowledge becomes public, it ascertains itself according to the socio-economic benefit present in that particular knowledge. Such ascertainment

requires a rigorous course of endogenous knowledge development by the society itself, particularly for its survival in the long-run.

On the other hand, the society born with deprived knowledge structure and knowledge flows requires a push from top to bottom; from government through national institutions in collaboration with non-governmental bodies, donor organizations, community workers, social organizer (directly or indirectly involved with non-governmental organizations) to allow such knowledge to fill up the gaps that society comprise. Certain national level efforts have proven themselves as the pioneers and effective bargains for the development and refinement of knowledge that is endogenously acquired.

Among the lessons that can be drawn from past efforts and the current situation of the rural poor, we can say that:

1. In order to make use of economies of scale in the production and marketing processes and compete effectively in input, output and capital markets, small farmers and landless agricultural laborers require incentives, opportunities and the organizational capacity to develop cohesion, discipline, human skills, and the capital necessary to plan and implement development activities.
2. Many efforts in rural development have tended to increase dependence on development agencies rather than enhancing local capacity to conceive and undertake development activities in accordance with local priorities and opportunities.
3. The specialized agencies for training, credit, input supply, extension etc. set up by governments are often hampered in their effectiveness and reach by the lack of a strong and broad institutional base at the village level.
4. At the village level, utilization of different resources tends to be integrated systemically. Development agencies, however, tend to be organized on a sectoral or functional basis instead of following an integrated, multi-functional approach. To make optimal use of the village opportunities, it is important that villagers have the management capacity to integrate the assistance available from outside agencies with their own specific needs.

Many efforts at promoting group cooperation and activity have been captured by special interests that seek only to maximize their own benefits. To meet this problem requires special procedures and discipline that ensure participation of all possible beneficiaries, and effective supervision of the development process.

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