

## **Measuring the Success and Sustainability of the Rural Support Network in Pakistan**

Greg Kaser and James Morton<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

The Rural Support Programmes in Pakistan are a leading example of community-driven development, which, over nearly three decades has replicated its activities successfully across most rural regions. But while its reach has been impressive, involving 20 percent of rural households in the districts where it operates (representing around 7 percent of the rural population), questions have been raised as to whether it acts as a temporary substitute for the state and community enabler, ready to depart the stage once other community-based organisations or local government are effectively working. In fact, it is clear that the RSPs are poised for further expansion and have by no means yet worked themselves out of a job, even in those Northern Areas where they began. The RSPs' operations remain dependent upon international donor funding and national government programmes. The reluctance to disengage and contemplate an exit strategy may be a case of mismatching agendas, with donors looking for sustainable results from their funding in the near term while the RSP movement pursues another path, more in line with the original concept of sustainable development. It is proposed that the international development agencies interpret sustainability in a way that is incommensurate with the concept adopted at the 1992 Rio Summit. The political economy of rural development, in a context where the state fails to function adequately, provides the space for a civil society organisation to exert countervailing power, so as to negotiate resources for development from the government and donors, and the villagers' long-term survival as a cohesive community. In this perspective the question of sustainability becomes linked to the community's survival as a unit in the wider socio-economic transformation of a country's urban/rural and industrial/agricultural balance. The RSP movement may be viewed as a response not so much to state failure as to the rural development context in which communities find themselves economically disempowered from managing the changes around them.

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Kaser is Project Director for Asia at HTSPE Ltd and Dr James Morton is a former Managing Director of HTSPE Ltd.

Over the last 20 years the Rural Support Programmes (RSPs) network in Pakistan has established itself as an example of successful community-driven development. The RSPs bring together nine rural development organisations which share a common institutional structure, as legally established not-for-profit corporations, and a common approach to social mobilisation for Community-Driven Development. With a membership of 175,300 village activists, of whom 58 percent are women, the RSPs are one of the largest developing country NGOs involved in poverty reduction and rural development. Their approach has been featured by the World Bank as one of thirteen “ideas that work”.<sup>2</sup> The RSP’s approach is founded on the work of Akhter Hammed Khan and the ideas he first developed at the Academy for Rural Development at Comilla Thana in East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, and then on the Daudzai project in North West Frontier Province. The first Rural Support Programme was set up at the initiative of His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan, with advice from Akhter Hamid Khan, whose close associate Shoaib Sultan Khan was appointed general manager. Since 1982, the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) has operated in the Northern Areas and Chitral districts of northern Pakistan, a frontier zone of some one million inhabitants. The environment of these districts ranges from deserts in the valleys to temperate and fertile grasslands on the high mountain slopes. Villages depend for their livelihoods on the watershed for farming and pastoralism.

Over the next two and a half decades, continuous support from the Aga Khan Foundation, and from international donors, has allowed AKRSP to implement a community-driven approach at a larger scale and, crucially, over a longer time frame than is normal for a development intervention. This has allowed the communities time to decide their own needs and how best to address them. Since this start, another eight RSPs have been established (see Table 1), bringing the movement ‘down country’, into a very different social and economic context.

AKRSP	Aga Khan Rural Support Programme	1982
SRSP	Sarhad Rural Support Programme	1989
BRSP	Balochistan Rural Support Programme	1991
NRSP	National Rural Support Programme	1992
GBTI	Ghazi Barotha Taraqiyati Idara	1995
TRDP	Thardeep Rural Development Programme	1997

<sup>2</sup> Deepa Narayan and Elena Glinskaya, editors, 2007, *Ending Poverty in Asia: Ideas that Work*, Washington DC: The World Bank: chapter 5.

PRSP	Punjab Rural Support Programme	1998
SGA	Sindh Graduates Association	2001
SRSO	Sindh Rural Support Organisation	2003

HTSPE has worked with the RSPs on behalf of the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) since 1998 to assist in the establishment and strengthening of its monitoring and evaluation capability. HTSPE Ltd is a consultancy providing international programme management and technical services in developing countries. The company managed a major UK funded project between 1998 and 2003 to support the AKRSP in participatory development planning and natural resource management. Technical assistance and training was also provided in agronomy, environmental conservation, and marketing for niche sectors including vegetable seeds, horticulture, fruit production, irrigation and water usage, micro-finance and rural enterprise development. Social development was also supported, including training around gender issues. Professor Geof Wood played a major part in this work, in which monitoring and evaluation and lesson learning were important aspects of the technical assistance.

One of the RSP movement's greatest strengths has been its openness to debate, even with outsiders, and its ability to respond to changing circumstances. The technical assistance around programme monitoring and evaluation provided by HTSPE, working with Geof Wood, found a responsive and active partner in AKRSP, which set the tone for how the RSP movement responded to all of these challenges. In 2009, DFID commissioned HTSPE to strengthen the performance monitoring and impact assessment of the Rural Support Programmes Network, and the current paper draws upon this work, in which the issues of measuring impact and attribution loomed large.

In Part 1, we describe how the RSP has evolved and its approach to community-driven development. Part 2 addresses the role of the RSP network in relation to civil society (the community) and the state, asking whether its intermediation is required over the long-term or has a catalytic purpose. We suggest, in Part 3, that over the long-term rural development demands enthalpic – or on-going – intervention to permit communities to manage the stresses of relative economic decline and avoid dispersal as industrialisation and urbanisation accelerate. The mismatching agendas held by the donors and implicitly by beneficiaries like the RSPs may be related to differing conceptions of 'sustainability', with the latter seeing long term survival at stake.

## PART 1

### The Growth of the RSPN

A number of broadly positive evaluations of the AKRSP have strengthened the profile of the RSP approach and helped the movement expand its reach. A World Bank evaluation of the AKRSP in 1986 concluded that the substantial increase in incomes in the northern areas “appear to reflect, at least in part, the successes of the RSP in organising poor people, and including them in mainstream development opportunities”.<sup>3</sup> In 1989, USAID was looking for a new way to carry forward activities it had been supporting in North West Frontier Province (NWFP). It had been impressed by the work of AKRSP, which was working in neighbouring districts, and it was suggested that it should expand into NWFP. Instead, AKRSP proposed that a Sarhad Rural Support Programme be established, as separate body but with the same principles of social mobilisation and the primacy of community organisations. Since then, scaling up by replication, not by expansion, has become a central element in the RSP approach. In 1991, the Balochistan Rural Support Programme was set up, once again by building on the work of an earlier programme, one supported by the German development agency GTZ.

A second World Bank evaluation, in 1989, confirmed the positive findings of the first, describing AKRSP as “remarkably successful”. In 1991, the government of Pakistan recognised this, especially so after a visit by the then Prime Minister, and Shoaib Sultan Khan, as general manager of AKRSP, was asked to help set up a National Rural Support Programme (NRSP), with an initial government commitment of one billion Rupees to fund it. This presented an “opportunity for large-scale replication”,<sup>4</sup> but subsequent political turmoil leading up to the 1993 election, which was won by the Pakistan People’s Party, meant that only half of that money was received and the longer term commitment was lost. It was decided, therefore, to use the payment to set up an endowment for NRSP, instead of using it to fund projects. Since that time, the concept of an endowment to provide stable core funding has been taken up by other RSPs.<sup>5</sup> It has become another common element in the RSP approach.

Core funding from an endowment was not enough to support major programmes however. AKRSP had what can be described as a ‘core donor’ and substantial long-term support from a small group of donors, in particular the governments of Canada

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<sup>3</sup> World Bank, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Narayan and Glinskaya, 2007: pp. 149 and 160.

and the UK. Other RSPs have not had this advantage and they have sought programme funding in various ways. Sources have included government, in particular provincial governments, and even borrowing from commercial banks, as well as from international donors and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). For most RSPs, however, it was only the establishment in 1998 of the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund, under a newly elected Muslim League government, that allowed them to undertake major programmes. This is what provided the opportunity for further replication of the RSP model. The Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund secured \$US 90 million from the World Bank for micro-credit and community infrastructure programmes, to be implemented by NGOs, between 1998 and 2004. Taken together, the RSPs were the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund's largest single partner and took over 60 percent of its funds; contributing to a success which secured much larger funding for a second phase.

During the later 1990s, the RSP approach was taken up by two more programmes. The Thardeep Rural Development Programme was established in 1997 in south-eastern Sindh. Like SRSP and BRSP, it was formed on the basis of an existing programme, in this case one founded by the charity Save the Children and Swiss Development Aid. These three cases can be seen as examples of RSPs allowing programmes to graduate from direct international support and offering an exit route for the international donors. In the case of BRSP, however, the process was not a success, apparently because neither the international donor nor the government of Pakistan were willing to grant sufficient autonomy.

Ghazi Barotha Taraqati Idara, set up in 1995, met a different purpose. To mitigate the impact of a major hydro-power plant, GBTI used the social mobilisation approach to help communities participate in their own development and claim their rights to appropriate resettlement options and compensation. The Sindh Graduate's Association is another different case. It was founded in 1972 by a group of graduates to work with the rural poor. It joined the RSP movement in 2001, in recognition of the parallels between the two organisations' work.

The establishment of the Punjab Rural Support Programme in 1998 marked a further important development of the RSP model, a direct partnership with the provincial government of Punjab, which committed \$US 10 million to extend the RSP approach to those parts of Punjab that were not already covered by NRSP. The Sindh Rural

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<sup>5</sup> The SRSP obtained an endowment from the government of NWFP of Rupees 500 million. In Balochistan, by contrast, GTZ did not provide an endowment to secure BRSP's autonomy, and when the German funding ceased in 1997 the BRSP was unable to continue its work.

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Support Organisation, founded in 2003, followed the same model with the government of Sindh. In both cases, the provincial government's first large contribution went to create an endowment.

Two things hold the RSP movement together. The first comes from the shared principles and structure, from common experiences and from common constraints that all the RSPs face: funding, staffing and such like. The second, just as important, comes from the leadership, initially that of Akhter Hamid Khan and Shoaib Sultan Khan, but increasingly from a core group of experienced RSP chief executives and managers, whose shared experience has been the driving force behind the movement's development. A group of informed champions with the public service and military have also played an important role.

### **The RSP Approach**

Some within the modern RSP movement are reluctant to talk of a model, preferring to talk of a set of principles and a conceptual package. However, in earlier years a clear model was presented and there is little doubt that this was attractive to donors and other outsiders. The RSP approach has been summed up by Shoaib Sultan Khan under three headings:<sup>6</sup>

#### **A Conceptual Package**

- SOCIAL ORGANISATION: Bringing the poor into an organised fold.
- HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT: Upgrading of human skills of the poor, such as managerial, productive and cooperative skills to enable them to make best use of available resources.
- CAPITAL FORMATION: Generation of capital by the poor, through the discipline of savings as capital is power, without which the poor can never hope to be self-reliant.

#### **Three Essentials for Success**

- Willingness on the part of the poor to help themselves;
- Honest and competent activists;
- A support organisation.

Strict adherence to these principles, to what is called the Purity of the Concept, is enjoined and a watchword within the RSP movement.

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<sup>6</sup> SS Khan and JK Tareen, 2004, Presentation *Scaling up Poverty Reduction*.

To put the concept into practice “the three central elements of the organisational model are (i) a support organisation; (ii) a social [beneficiary] organisation; and (iii) a programme of activities and services”.<sup>7</sup> The RSP is the support organisation and the beneficiary organisations are variously described as Village, Community or Women’s Organisations. Most community organisations are formed at the level of the *muhalla*, a sub-section of the village, akin to a neighbourhood. Higher level community organisations may be formed, at, for instance, the village level.

The underlying strategy was to ‘glue’ the members of each community organisation (CO) around “a commonly needed project or service by pooling labour, savings, etc”. The original focus was on productive activities and economic development through accumulating savings for investment and equity capital. Later RSPs tended to use credit as their entry point, rather than a production project. A typical RSP programme would include:

- A grant-funded village infrastructure project, to give focus to the newly formed community organisation;
- Saving and credit scheme;
- Local enterprise development;
- Skills development;
- Linkages to government, non-governmental organisations, etc.

The model rests on three figures. The Social Organiser (SO) is a professional employed by the RSP. The Village Activist is a member of the community who is described as the “moving spirit behind the CO”. The Village Specialist is a member of the community who trained to provide services, typically linked either to the maintenance of the physical infrastructure or to the village enterprises. Plant protection and animal health workers were early examples in AKRSP. Skills development, to give the activists and specialists the capabilities they need for their roles, is central to the programme.

Village Activists have a critical part to play and their motivation is a key factor behind the success of the RSP approach. A fundamental statement is that “the activist is not motivated by sentiments of altruism; he/she sincerely believes that his/her own welfare can be improved with the welfare of other members of the community”. How this works under different circumstances and social structures is likely to influence

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<sup>7</sup> M H Khan, 2001, Community Organisations and Rural Development, Lahore: Vanguard Books.

the success of the community organisation. Village Specialists expect to be paid for the services they provide.

A graduated process sees the SO start by identifying Village Activists and encouraging them to work as a team. Over time, the leadership of the programme is transferred to the activists, while the SO moves to a more supportive role, providing mentoring and technical assistance. However much support is provided by the RSP, the primacy of the community organisation is a fundamental principle from the start. Decisions about projects are made by the community organisation, not just in its name, and RSP staff do not involve themselves in settling internal issues. This relationship is embodied in a contractual agreement between each community organisation and the RSP. The agreement sets standards for the community organisation: regularity of meetings, management, and so on. The RSP holds it to those standards but does not dictate how they are to be met.

Processes and procedures are also part of the approach. The starting point is a series of discussions between the SOs and the community. A situation analysis provides a framework to the dialogue about which project the community organisation wishes to implement and subsequent village level and micro-investment plans are developed to identify credit, enterprise development and other initiatives.

### **Achievements of the RSP**

The RSPN has an impressive record of achievement. By 2009, membership of the 158,000 RSP sponsored community organisations stood at 930,000 women and 1,840,000 men. As Table 2 shows, the coverage and outreach achieved within Pakistan is significant. RSP is present in 67 percent of rural Union Councils reaching 20 percent of the total rural population in its operating areas.<sup>8</sup> In the Northern Areas, now called Gilgit-Baltistan, where AKRSP began, it has reached over 80 percent of rural households. The fact that RSPs target the poorest districts means that the network does not seek to cover all districts. Under its Second Generation Social Mobilisation Strategy, the RSP network aims to scale up its work to reach seven million households, or around 30 percent of the rural population.

<b>Province</b>	<b>RSP Districts</b>	<b>RSP UCs</b>	<b>UC Coverage</b>	<b>RSP Households</b>	<b>Household Coverage</b>

<sup>8</sup> Pakistan's total rural population is around 108 million, so the outreach of RSPN takes in around 7-8 percent of the total.

<sup>9</sup> Source: RSPN, Outreach, Quarterly Issue 1 for April-June 2009.



Islamabad CT	1	12	100%	12,780	29%
Balochistan	15	207	73%	128,810	27%
NWFP	19	495	64%	474,361	31%
Sindh	21	521	61%	443,399	18%
Punjab	34	1,891	72%	1,215,179	16%
Azad Kashmir	6	99	60%	123,173	41%
Gilgit-Baltistan	5	93	99%	94,001	81%
<b>Total</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>3,318</b>	<b>69%</b>	<b>2,491,701</b>	<b>20%</b>

N.B. A Union Council, often called a village council, covers a village and its surrounding area.

RSPs have sought to empower women mainly through enterprise development, micro-credit, education and skills training. Women's community organisations were established to allow women to work collectively to identify their needs and have a voice in community affairs. There is evidence that income-generating activities specifically designed for women have improved their status within the home as well as their livelihoods. But RSPs have not seen rights-based advocacy as part of their remit and have been forced to tread carefully in the face of conservative reaction. Women's representation at senior level within the RSP movement is low.

Nevertheless, RSPs have the largest outreach to poor rural women of any Pakistani organisation. The fact that women are proportionately more active than men in both micro-credit and training is a further measure of the effort the RSP movement has put into making gender equality part of their work.

By the late 1990s, the RSPs were collectively the largest suppliers of microcredit in Pakistan, with 80 percent of all clients.<sup>10</sup> As its programmes have matured, however, RSP is moving away from micro-credit schemes, which, if successful, may be floated as rural banks, and is increasingly providing public services. Apart from training one million community organisation members, the RSPs have trained traditional birth attendants and community teachers. The Institute of Rural Management was established in 1993 to train the cadre of development programme managers. There are already 1,463 community schools established by the RSPs, mostly by AKRSP (867).<sup>11</sup> In addition, RSPs have supported projects for adult education, women's literacy, female school enrolment in public schools, child centred learning and others. They have also established basic health units, mother and child centres, community health centres and eye surgery, immunisation and vitamin deficiency programmes in the health sector. RSP has recently piloted a community-led sanitation programme

<sup>10</sup> Narayan and Glinskaya, 2007: p. 156.

<sup>11</sup> RSPN, Outreach, Quarterly Issue 1 for April-June 2009.

and the introduction of bio-gas to rural households. The former initiative involved community mobilisation to build latrines while the latter will result in the establishment of a bio-gas supply company.

As the gaps in village infrastructure are filled and access to financial services is improved, the RSPs have moved into the provision of public services. While its activities do not match the scale of the development NGOs in Bangladesh, such as BRAC, Grameen and Proshika, the RSP network is in a strong position to scale up its contribution to Pakistan's development. Since 1994, with UN Development Programme support, the RSP network has worked to spread the approach to other South Asian countries, with most success in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. But the question remains as to whether RSPs are acting as a temporary substitute for government, with no long-term role, or represents a unique model of community-driven development.

Whilst it is clear that international donors appreciate the work of the RSPs, their evaluation reports indicate they are less convinced that the approach can be sustained without continued funding. The first World Bank evaluation of 1986 of the AKRSP suggested that the community organisations might be in a position to carry on without RSP support by the early 1990s, though by 2001 the evaluators had come to accept that RSP support remained necessary. The endowments permit the RSPs to preserve a core capability, but delivering programmes calls for additional longer-term funding, which can only come from either government sources or international development assistance. Donors, for their part, want to see sustainability in the programmes they fund. Increasingly donors are requiring impact evaluation studies and are asking tougher questions of intermediary organisations, such as the RSPs, in terms of their added value and impact.

The RSPs' outputs are monitored but its impact is less clear. The rationale for intervention is based on the proposition that there is capacity within rural civil society that can be animated and channelled into local development projects for the community's benefit. Some of these projects may become self-sufficient over the medium to long-term. Some may improve the situation of the poor, of women or other marginalised groups and thus contribute to a more inclusive process of growth and social cohesion. (It should be noted that the membership of community organisations is not confined to the poorest and marginalised, but comprises sections of the village elite, farmers and artisans.) Given that the RSPs have been able to deliver these sorts of outputs the network has secured donor support over the years. But an unspoken question remains: why should these development initiatives be undertaken through

the RSPs? For instance, micro-finance is a development tool used throughout the world and in most instances the donors channel their funds through a specialist provider of micro-finance. The RSPN is fairly unusual in that it acts as an intermediary organisation that is not exclusively focussed on one particular measure, but seeks to provide a more comprehensive set of solutions to the eradication of rural poverty and local development.

## **PART 2**

As consultants managing international development cooperation programmes, HTSPE works at the interface between international development agencies and international financial institutions, the donors, who pay its fees, and the so-called beneficiaries of donor funding, often national and provincial governments or non-governmental organisations (NGOs), who receive its services. It works with both sides of the partnership and often finds that the donors and beneficiaries are following different agendas, even when the programme's objectives are well-defined and agreed jointly. Where the donors and the beneficiaries share common goals they can collaborate effectively, but they may each have additional goals, sometimes not articulated formally, which adds complexity to their relationship. When the partners are at odds the 'usual suspect' is likely to be the non-articulated goals, or 'hidden agenda', that one or other institution is looking to achieve. Strengthening the partnership between donor and beneficiary, and thus facilitating their collaboration, could therefore involve recognising the validity of the additional objectives. Indeed, a good programme design should in principle have uncovered and made explicit the beneficiary's objectives, but quite often the beneficiary's agenda is translated into formulas that meet the donor's expectations.

Thus, when we come across a puzzle or conflict in expectations experience tells us that the partners are viewing the world from different perspectives. They may be using the same words but their meaning is mismatched.

### **Mismatching Agendas**

Consultancy in the development field exists to provide capacity that is not available to beneficiaries in developing countries. It is in this process of capacity building that the well known analogy "teach a man to fish" holds. According to this proposition, it is better to give someone a fishing rod, so that he or she can provide for themselves, than to dole out sustenance year on year. Common sense then tells us that the proposition "teach a man to fish" is better than "give the man a handout". But such an argument can be misleading once we examine development in the round, taking out

the structural factors. We run the danger of trying to label development programmes as being better or worse on the basis that one provides capacity building (teaching) while another provides a subsidy (handouts), when both are necessary. For example, the World Bank study already cited of “Ideas that Work”, views the RSPN’s activities as ‘catalytic’, implying that its community mobilisation is the catalyst that accelerates the development process.<sup>12</sup>

Development is in any case a metaphor. We measure successful development using a wide range of performance indicators, reflecting the diversity of meaning we attach to the term. Sometimes we aggregate these performance indicators in a composite index, such as the Human Development Index calculated by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in order to rank the progress made by countries and regions towards developed status. Developed countries have, broadly speaking, eradicated absolute poverty and instituted some form of welfare state. For the most part, developed countries are industrial and highly urban societies. Once developing countries cross the threshold, whatever that is, their governments have often joined the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and become donors themselves.<sup>13</sup> But, as the OECD’s name indicates, developed countries are still developing. Indeed, the European Union, a developed country grouping *par excellence*, has a specific goal of promoting sustainable development within Europe, as well as economic, social and territorial cohesion and solidarity among its Member States.<sup>14</sup>

Sustainable development was defined at the Rio Summit of 1992 as ensuring “socially responsible economic development while protecting the resource base and the environment for the benefit of future generations”.<sup>15</sup> This was itself a weakening of the definition put forward by the Brundtland Commission as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.<sup>16</sup> The scale of ambition has been further diluted by the practical application of the concept. The donors define sustainability in three ways: the continuation of benefits from a development intervention *after major*

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<sup>12</sup> Narayan and Glinskaya, 2007: p. 138.

<sup>13</sup> Mexico joined the OECD in 1994, South Korea in 1996 and Chile in 2010. The Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia, three former socialist countries, joined in 1995, 1996 and 2000 respectively.

<sup>14</sup> The EU is also empowered by its Member States to contribute to the sustainable development of the Earth and to solidarity and mutual respect among its peoples, to free and fair trade and the eradication of poverty (Article 2 of the Treaty of Lisbon of 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Cited in OECD, 2001, *The DAC Guidelines: Strategies for Sustainable Development: Guidance for Development Cooperation*, Paris: OECD: pp. 11 and 15.

*development assistance has been completed*; the probability of continued long-term benefits; and the resilience to risk of the net benefit flows over time.<sup>17</sup> The sustainability of a development programme bears little relationship to the concept of sustainable development as such, being applied not to the form of the intervention's impact, but, more narrowly, to the relationship between the results and the donor's funding. The question being asked of the intervention is whether its beneficial results will persist after the donor has ceased funding; a valid question, to be sure, but not the same as whether the intervention is promoting inter-generational sustainability.

### **The 'Contingent' or 'Emerging' Reality**

The original vision for AKRSP was clear: that this process would catalyse and support the establishment of self-sufficient, long-lasting community institutions capable of managing the public goods of the community and representing the community's interests with the state and other external actors. AKRSP's original mandate was to work itself out of a job by completing this process.

Nearly three decades later, it is clear that that this vision has not been achieved. There is one dominant practical reason for this: the fact that the Pakistani state is still a long way short of the reliable, responsive partner which community organisations need, if they are to deal with that partner unaided. However, this should not disguise much more interesting questions about the underlying concept of social mobilisation. Geof Wood's role in raising these questions is well remembered in RSP circles, respectfully but not entirely gratefully; because they continue to pose fundamental difficulties for the movement.

The central difficulty concerns what the Community Organisation is actually for: What purpose does it serve which can give it a reason for being in the long term? Because both the literature and the RSP impact assessment material show many more cases of community participation as a tactical response to a particular situation, most frequently the availability of development funds. There are far fewer cases of community organisations growing and developing into established institutions with a clear role in the political economy.

Added to which, rapid changes in Pakistani society, and the economy, mean that possible roles for local institutions are also changing. *Valleys in Transition* describes how migration and economic development led to 'greater socio-economic

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<sup>16</sup> Brundtland Commission, 1987, *Our Common Future: Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: para. 27.

<sup>17</sup> DFID, 2005, *Guidance on Evaluation and Review for DFID Staff: Annex 5: Glossary of standard DAC evaluation terms*: London: DFID; p. 69; our emphasis added.

differentiation and inequality' in the 1990s.<sup>18</sup> This meant that an inclusive model of grassroots participation, which had suited the 1980s when most people in the area 'were poor and were following similar livelihood strategies', became less relevant.

In essence this meant one of two things. It was possible to argue that the move to a more individual and wealthier society meant that the time for grassroots cooperative participation was over. Alternatively, cooperative action needed to be re-directed. The 'productivist' development strategy, focussed on raising incomes through collective investment in physical and financial capital, was no longer enough. This was effectively a strategy which went all the way back to the original Comilla model. Instead, a social development strategy with effective welfare and social safety net components was needed. One which focussed on those groups left behind by the 'productivist' success. This move towards targeting poorer groups meant at least an adjustment to the earlier inclusive approach, if not to its abandonment.

The shift towards social development from the development of productive capacity highlighted a further question about the purposes of social mobilisation and gave greater importance to the question of how grassroots organisations relate to the state. The RSPs have always said that their aim is to create robust community institutions and to catalyse 'linkages' between those institutions and the state organisations responsible for public services. However, given the continued weakness of the social services provided by the state<sup>19</sup>, the possibilities of encouraging community organisations to make their own provision and of the RSPs themselves starting to provide services, inevitably arose.

RSP responses to these issues have been shaped by the availability of funding and by political developments. None of the newer RSPs have benefitted from the same long period of relative intensive, yet flexible donor support and AKRSP. For much of the 1990s, the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund was the only substantial source of finance. The fund's focus on micro-credit and community physical infrastructure limited the RSPs' ability to move away from the original productivist model. It has also meant that most Community Organisations only have between 20 and 30 members, a size tailored principally to micro credit operations. On the political front the military regime's devolution programme, to establish democratic governments with executive powers at local levels, raised questions about where the dividing line

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<sup>18</sup> Geof Wood, Abdul Malik, & Sumaira Sagheer, 2006, *Valleys in Transition: Twenty years of AKRSP's experience in Northern Pakistan*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>19</sup> See Stephen F Rasmussen and other in Narayan and Glinskaya, 2007, *Scaling up Rural Support Programme in Pakistan*. Rasmussen sees the RSP movement arising from the consequences of government failure, leaving a "service delivery gap" (p. 137).

should lie between elected local administrations and participatory community organisations.

In the last five years, as a result, a very different model of social mobilisation has emerged. This presents a tiered structure of Local Support Organisations (LSO) encompassing a number of Village Development Organisations within a Union Council district. Each Village Development Organisations groups the COs in its district. The RSPs aim is to transfer many frontline social mobilisation activities to the LSOs. In parallel with this new structure, the RSPs have proposed a comprehensive Union Council Poverty Reduction Plan, which includes substantial social development and safety net elements. They have also been closely involved in the development of Pakistan's use of Poverty Score Cards to distribute welfare transfer operations such as the Benazir Income Support Programme.

These developments raise the question about the RSP's relation to the state. One reason advanced for the failure of the original exit strategy is that the government is still too weak, or unwilling, to act as the partner the community needs to further its development. If that is correct, it implies that the RSP's job is either to act as a substitute for the state or to take upon itself the task of strengthening local government.

### **The Role of the State**

The community organisations set up by the RSPs mediate between the donor and the ultimate recipients within the community of the developmental benefits. Furthermore, while RSPs collaborate with the formal state structures to deliver programme, they also advocate on behalf of community organisations to the public administration, thereby by-passing local government. In principle, local self-government should be institutional mechanism by which communities manage their collective affairs and organise their relationship with 'higher' state structures. Under the IULA Declaration, which emerged in part as a response to Agenda 21,<sup>20</sup> "public responsibilities shall be exercised by those basic units of local government which are closest to the citizen". Local self-government, the Declaration states, "denotes the right and duty of local authorities to regulate and manage public affairs under their own responsibility and in the interests of the local population" to be exercised by freely elected councils. They should have a "general right to act on their own initiative with regard to any matter which is not exclusively assigned to any other authority nor

specifically excluded from the competence of local government.”<sup>21</sup> Local governments in Pakistan are elected bodies with mandates and resources to undertake development activities.

Is the RSP network intended as an alternative institution to the state authorities on the grounds that the RSPs are more effective and, indeed, more legitimate, because of their commitment to participatory approaches to decision-making? Is it the failure of local government in Pakistan to perform the duties as the collective voice and arm of the community that has provided the space for the RSPN to occupy (to the benefit of its constituency)? Or, is the RSN performing another function altogether, operating as a ‘third sector’ institution, between the state and the market? We suggest that the answers to these questions fall to the RSPN itself but offer the following remarks in Part 3.

### **PART 3**

If there are mismatched agendas between the donors and the RSPs then it appears that much of the problem concerns the concept of sustainability. If it is a temporary institution whose justification for existence will be removed once more effective and genuine local self-government is in place, then at least the donors will know where they stand. Donors may continue to support the RSPs in order to get the job done, while encouraging decentralised government. But there will come a point when donors (and the national government) decide that sufficient capacity now exists within the local public administration exists. To continue channelling funding through the RSPs will undermine the legitimate state structures. On the other hand, if the RSP network is an institution that fulfils an empowering role within civil society, that is, a role outside of the state’s functions, then it is to be viewed not as a response to state failure but as answering another challenge.

#### **The Problem of Sustainability**

We should recall that the term sustainable development was conceived as a way of capturing the inter-generational transfer of assets and liabilities: to ensure that future generations are not burdened with the results of our own reckless consumption of natural resources in particular. But too often the need to demonstrate ‘sustainability’ at the project or programme level has become a key criterion in allocating funds. In

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<sup>20</sup> Agenda 21 describes the programme adopted by governments at the Rio Summit in 1992 in pursuit of sustainable development. It envisages a key role for local government (chapter 28).

<sup>21</sup> World Wide Declaration of Local Self-Government by the International Union of Local Authorities at Toronto in June 1993: Articles 2 and 3.



truth what is being asked for by donors is not so much sustainability in its inter-generational sense as whether there is a good prospect for the project to become 'self-supporting' within a global inter-dependent capitalist market economy over the medium to long-term. A more accurate description of what is usually termed 'sustainability' would be a criterion that a project is potentially self-replicating or self-supporting. Such an emphasis finds its justification in the inclination among donors that development interventions be catalytic, with a defined exit point. A catalytic impact, whereby the intervention provides the extra ingredient to accelerate the development process, is assumed to provide more 'bangs for the buck'. At the same time, the emphasis upon self-sufficiency tends to de-legitimate projects and programmes that offer an enthalpic impact based upon sustained and on-going resource inputs, possibly with no defined timescale for exit.<sup>22</sup> Although enthalpic programmes could be ended at a specified milestone (for example, unemployment falls to a target percentage of the labour force or when median income approaches a pre-specified fraction of income per person) their long-lived nature means that donors cannot proclaim an 'early win'.

If donors are working within a rationale for intervention based on securing catalytic impacts from their funding, whereas the beneficiaries' implicit agenda anticipates enthalpic – on-going – funding there is a mismatch in their respective perception of sustainability. From the donor point of view, the beneficiary's objectives will appear undefined, and lacking in an exit strategy within the programme's timescale. But for the beneficiary, the donor is a temporary partner on a more extended journey.

It should be clear to development practitioners that very many developing countries (and regions within middle income countries, for instance, mountain zones) will not reach developed status for decades to come. Meanwhile donors prioritise project proposals according to their anticipated catalytic impact and 'sustainability', thereby denying beneficiaries the realistic levels of support they require over the long term. In such a context, rural beneficiaries are entitled to ask whether they will be helped to survive as communities, or is their fate to be dispersal. The route taken to industrialisation and urbanisation is strewn with abandoned villages and depopulation. In short, can such communities survive the journey intact?

The villages and towns of Oxfordshire, for example, where the authors reside, continue to face developmental/ transition challenges, despite being located in one of

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<sup>22</sup> The term catalytic comes from the chemistry of reactions. An enthalpic reaction, by contrast, involves the infusion of a substance or energy, for instance heat, to keep the reaction going. The word enthalpic derives from the Latin "to put into".

the most prosperous regions of Europe (with regional income per person of €38,900).<sup>23</sup> Rural communities do not just receive catalytic project funding; they receive on-going subsidies, particularly for agriculture. Although it is possible that some farms could survive without subsidy in an unregulated market, many would not and the countryside would revert to its natural condition over time. The political and economic compromise that has evolved within Europe, and in several other industrialised countries, involves an on-going transfer of part of the surplus generated from industry and services to support the continuation of agriculture. Such subsidies may include some funding for development and adaptation, but much of it represents survival funding. The objectives of the European Union's common agricultural policy are food self-sufficiency and the maintenance of a prosperous rural economy, in other words, to protect farmers' livelihoods permanently.

At its current stage of development, Pakistan is not in a position to transfer the gains from industry to support its agriculture. But its rural communities nevertheless desire to survive and prosper not simply as farmers but as villages and market towns. Part of the solution might involve empowerment projects that build capability to manage change and give communities some levers with which to control the pace and direction of the transition. Here again, there are opportunities to fund projects with catalytic impact. But, in our experience, the withdrawal of technical assistance according to a pre-determined timescale of, say, two to four years, may often leave the beneficiaries still unprepared to take over.

### **The Political Economy of the Transformation of the Countryside**

The rural economy in a developing country offers commercial opportunities within a framework of relative decline. As a country industrialises and urbanisation accelerates, the countryside will fall behind. For a rural community, development has both positive and negative features – in the sense that towns may appear as more attractive locations for households and enterprises. Managing these stresses cannot be the sole responsibility of the state. To be sure, the state has to underpin rural localities with good quality public services and infrastructure, even if it cannot afford the luxury of subsidising agriculture and other traditional modes of livelihood. But the relationship between the state and civil society is a two-way one. Politicians need citizens' votes while citizens need the public goods that politicians can secure. Ultimately if the population declines so will the supply of public goods, even if, as

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<sup>23</sup> EuroStat data for 2007 at Purchasing Power Standard. Oxfordshire, together with Berkshire and Buckinghamshire, have a regional income per person that is 156.1 of the EU-27 average (=100).

happens in many countries, parliamentary constituencies are designed to favour rural representation.

A dynamic civil society, then, becomes, perhaps, the critical factor in the political economy that secures a rural community's survival and permits it to achieve the transition to relative prosperity within a 'developed' national economy. Maintaining the confidence of political decision-makers, investors and households throughout the transformation from less developed status is a pre-condition for the village's survival as a cohesive community in which people still want to reside. (Some villages will not survive, often for sound reasons relating to their isolation, lack of natural resources and social capital. Deserted villages are to be found worldwide and it is the task of regional development planning to rationalise the process of abandonment.)

Moreover, civil society may have good reasons to distrust the state's competence. The three-fold separation of powers between the judiciary, the legislature and the executive focuses attention on the importance of establishing a self-regulating state system, in which institutions have clear competencies that they may not abuse or extend at will. But if these checks and balances prove ineffective, then the state cannot be relied upon to remedy grievances or render justice. As a result the state will not be able to regulate markets to check the dominance of corporate oligopoly or prevent exploitation resulting from asymmetrical economic power relations, for instance, in the labour market. Nor will the state be able to address effectively or fairly the inequalities of capability, which Amartya Sen has identified as providing the structure to chronic poverty, through the provision of public goods and progressive taxation.

The RSP approach involves collective agency (the community organisations), through which people may exercise voice and cooperation. Social mobilisation, as J K Galbraith pointed out, is a means of exercising countervailing power by which civil society may regulate itself.<sup>24</sup> Trade unions and producer or consumer associations/ cooperatives are civil society institutions that deploy social mobilisation to intervene directly in the market, to influence the share out of resources. It seems to us that the RSP network is an example of a civil society institution that is attempting to modify the trajectory of development in rural areas. The support organisation function of the RSPs enables sponsored community organisations to access the four

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<sup>24</sup> J K Galbraith, 1952, *American Capitalism – the Concept of Countervailing Power*, Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin. Galbraith advocated that the state should intervene only if the countervailing power of collective bargaining by trade unions or of bulk buying by consumers proved ineffectual in curbing the economic power of corporations under conditions of imperfect competition.

factors that are widely recognised as important for empowerment: access to information, a mechanism of inclusion and participation, community accountability and local organisational capacity.<sup>25</sup> These functions are not to be described as catalytic, even if there are aspects to the development intervention that are so, but arise from the perception that the community needs to become organised in order to bargain for its long-term development and survival. Its countervailing power has economic and political dimensions, recognising that the state itself is an institution with which it is necessary to negotiate with. The sustainability of the intervention thus becomes compatible with the concept of sustainable development, with its inter-generational implications.

## **Conclusion**

South Asia has been the most successful, and influential, test bed for some of the most important development ideas of the last forty years – participation, social mobilisation, micro-finance and more. It is home to some of the largest and most successful players: BRAC, Proshika and Grameen Bank in Bangladesh; the Society for the Elimination of Rural Poverty in India and the Rural Support Programmes in Pakistan. In their different ways, all these movements can be traced back to the Pakistan Academy for Rural Development, later the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development, and the work of Akther Hamid Khan. Since the 1960s the concept of grassroots cooperative participation launched at Comilla has evolved in many different ways in the three large countries of the sub-continent. There is no need to repeat to this audience of Geof Wood's long personal involvement in this field, or of the fact that he is the most perceptive and rigorous historian and analyst of this movement, or set of movements. Without his kind of analysis, grassroots participation might appear as just another one of the 'fashions and phases', in Geof's own phrase, to which rural development is prone.

Additionally, there is a question concerning the role of the community organisation itself. What role is the community organisations sponsored by the RSP expected to play in delivering benefits and services beyond the period of support by the RSP? Even if community mobilisation is necessary to initiate a development project, it does not follow that the community organisation has to remain in place once the project in question is up and running. International experience suggests that specialised community-based organisations, such as credit unions, producer associations or

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<sup>25</sup> See Narayan and Glinskaya, 2007: p. 5.

water-user associations are far more common than the wide-focus community organisations sponsored by the RSP.

We have addressed these questions by suggesting that mismatching agendas may exist between donors and beneficiaries, based on an implicit difference in defining the objective of 'sustainability'. For donors, the question being asked of the intervention is whether its beneficial results will persist after the donor has ceased funding. Such a formulation implies that interventions are intended to be catalytic. However, for beneficiaries, the donor is a temporary partner on a more extended journey. A mismatch occurs if the beneficiaries' implicit agenda anticipates enthalpic – on-going – funding. From the donor point of view, the beneficiary's objectives will then appear undefined, and lacking in an exit strategy within the programme's timescale. Beneficiary expectations for funding over several decades, rather than the normal donor timescale of two to four years, in turn reflects the situation of relative decline and disempowerment that rural communities face in developing countries.

Hence, the RSP network may be viewed as a potential agent not only of rural development but also as a means of securing the community's survival and cohesion over the long term. As a civil society movement it has a secular and professional character ('blind', as it were, to confessional tendencies, which are, of course, particularly powerful in Pakistan). The RSP movement has been successful in galvanising support from the professional strata and in providing poor communities with a collective voice free from political control (that is, it has an apolitical agenda). The RSPs have enabled villages to unite around concrete activities that can be seen to bring results in terms of local economic development and to demand resources for these from the state (and donors). From this perspective, then, the question of sustainability becomes linked to the community's survival as a unit in the wider socio-economic transformation of the country's urban/rural and industrial/agricultural balance. The RSP movement may be viewed as a response not so much to state failure as to the rural development context in which communities find themselves disempowered as the focus of power shifts to the cities and the global market.