

Imagining Another Future for Asia: Ideas and Pathways for Change

**By: Shoaib Sultan Khan
January 2011**

I am most grateful to the Patron of Asian University for Women Cherie Blair for inviting me to speak at this session of the Symposium.

When I look back on over 57 years of my working life in Government, United Nations , Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) and Rural Support Programmes (RSPs), my greatest successes and satisfaction were when I succeeded in forging genuine and meaningful partnerships with communities. Over fifty years ago my mentor Akhter Hameed Khan about whom Nobel laureate Prof. Yunus wrote:

“It is not enough to say that he was a great man. He was one of the great human beings of the past century. He was so much ahead of everybody else that he was seen more as a “misfit” than appreciated for his greatness ... We have a lot to discover and a whole lot to learn from him”,

Akhter Hameed Khan gave me my first lessons in forging partnerships with communities. But it is only during the last 30 years that I got the opportunity, thanks initially to UNICEF and later to UNDP but mainly due to His Highness the Aga Khan to fully and exclusively devote myself interacting with the communities in Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Over this period I have personally held dialogues with over 5,000 communities and I intend to share this experience with you.

I still vividly remember the bitterly cold December in 1982 when I drove 600 kilometers from Islamabad to Gilgit on a borrowed jeep. This was the beginning of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and forging of partnerships over the next twelve years with a million people in one of the most inhospitable and harshest terrain anywhere in the world. I brought them a simple message but time tested from the days

of Raifessen in Germany in Nineteenth Century Europe followed by Japan, Taiwan, Comilla (Bangladesh) and South Korea's Samuel Undong. This was a message of partnership in Development. AKRSP was not there to listen to their demands, needs and problems and offer solutions. AKRSP offered them only a methodology, an approach and social guidance to overcome their handicaps themselves. The villagers used to look at me with disbelief. A programme bearing the name of one of the richest person in the world not willing to solve their problems and asking them to do things first. I explained this is a partnership which entails obligations on both sides and unless the community was prepared to fulfil its obligations how can the partnership be formed? Many were impatient and would pester me to tell them what was the limit to which the Programme would help them if they accepted the terms of partnership and my simple response used to be your limit is our limit. Whatever the community can do or was willing to do was the programme limit.

I was very happy when the approach was reinforced by the first World Bank Assessment of AKRSP in 1987 saying that the first four years of AKRSP are the missed four years of most rural development projects in the world where blueprint took precedence over a process approach. AKRSP did not go to the communities with a pre-conceived package and left it to each community to identify their potential not only as community but also at household level.

I have seen people coming out of poverty with my own eyes and smiles on their faces instead of abstruse statistics.

The one million people I worked with for 12 years in Northern Areas of Pakistan through the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme reinforced my conviction of the tremendous potential and willingness in people to do many things themselves to come out of poverty. All that they needed was a support organisation to help them unleash their potential. Once organised the men and women took their destiny in their own hands. They knew what would bring them out of poverty.

They planted 50 million trees on land brought under irrigation range, generated about six megawatts of electricity through village built and managed mini-hydel projects acknowledged as the biggest concentration of community managed micro hydro projects anywhere in the world.

In agriculture, horticulture and livestock, the organized communities made quantum jump in introducing and later marketing apple varieties from California and cherries from France. Their apricot is picked up by a London buyer from the farm gate at Gilgit.

Their initiative in protecting wildlife in collaboration with IUCN and WWF has given rich dividends sharing 75% of the proceeds of trophy hunting with the Government Wildlife Department. The tourists can now watch ibex, markhor and sometimes even the snow leopard from the roadside.

Last time on my visit to Northern Areas I went to a village Ahmedabad where 26 years ago I had gone sitting in a basket pulled across the river as there was no bridge on the river. The village with 110 households was totally isolated although the Karakorum Highway passed by it. The village had no access, no road, no school, no health facility, no potable drinking water and no electricity. Today it has everything. These people would never have been touched by any growth strategy or macro planning. They needed a development strategy which involved each and every household in the development process. Unfortunately this is what our macro planners fail to comprehend. When I asked them what was the secret of their success, their spontaneous response was “we got organised”. The village roads were marked with dust bins and environment was litter free.

According to second World Bank evaluation of AKRSP, in ten years the income of the people of Northern Areas had in real terms more than doubled.

In 1994, when UNDP asked me to take lessons learnt in Northern Areas of Pakistan to South Asia, India being the largest country in the region it was the greatest challenge

to South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme (SAPAP) and to me personally as a Pakistani to make a difference to the lives of women and their households there. My apprehensions were baseless. The people of Andhra Pradesh and the State Government welcomed me with open arms and treated me with unforgettable kindness, hospitality and affection and continues to do so.

In Andhra Pradesh, I was told that after 7 years almost 75% of the organised households had risen above the subsistence level. When I doubted this statement, the women insisted on taking me to their homes. I visited a number of houses which I had visited on my first visit in 1995 which had barely any amenities of life available. I was wonderstruck to find modern amenities like TV, telephone, toilets etc., in the houses. In one house, I did not see TV and I asked the lady if she had been left behind others. She asked me to visit her backyard where more than 35 goats were standing. She explained her children are young and unlike other children, do not insist on going to neighbours to see the TV. Hence she made her choice of preferring goats to TV. This reminded me of Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen's book "Development As Freedom."

One of the important outcomes of mobilised communities in Andhra has been the adoption of Community Managed Sustainable Agriculture (CMSA) todate adopted by over 300,000 farmers. It has enabled the poor to break out of the exploitative relations with the money lenders, fertilizer and pesticides traders. In next 5 years, Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP) of Andhra Pradesh plans to take it to 10-12 million acres covering 50 to 60% of the cultivable area of the State. The environmental benefits of CMSA are enormous. It will convert the State into a "green State" with impact on climate change and global warming. However, the main motivation for the poor for adopting these practices is the quantum jump in their net incomes. The lesson is that however good the technology may be, without peoples involvement through their strong grassroots institutions, it will remain in the laboratories and universities. We need a people centred solution to food security and climate change.

The Andhra Government keeps on inviting me despite phasing out of UNDP SAPAP in 2003.

In July 2008, I was again invited to Andhra which had by now organized over 10 million rural women households comprising 45 million people and helped them rise above the level of subsistence by accessing in 2009-10 over US\$ one billion from commercial banks for agricultural and other activities.

Today the Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN) in Pakistan extends to 107 out of 131 districts of Pakistan making a difference to the livelihood of nearly 13-15 million people. Pakistan is probably the only country in South Asia where successive governments have provided resources since 1992 for fostering independent and autonomous support organizations as envisaged by 1991 Poverty Commission set up by SAARC Heads of State commending Social Mobilisation to be the centerpiece for all poverty reduction strategies of South Asian governments.

Conclusion

Andhra has been able to demonstrate an approach of poverty reduction encompassing over 10 million rural poor families comprising, nearly 45 million people which has no parallel anywhere in South Asia. Andhra has found the solution to rural poverty comprising:

- i) a three-tier institutional grassroots framework of Self Help Groups (SHGs), Village Organizations (VOs) and Mahila Mandal Samakhya (MMSs);
- ii) an independent and autonomous sensitive support organization like Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP) for fostering a statewide 3-tier grassroots institutional framework;
- iii) an interest-subsidy policy for the poor matched with priority banking by scheduled banks for the poor;

- iv) a state-wide housing subsidy for the destitutes and shelterless identified by VOs:
- v) full and active support by the State and district administrations under the direction of the Chief Minister and the Minister for Rural Development; and
- vi) pro-poor Union Government policies such as the employment guarantee scheme and other pro-poor initiatives.

I also paid a visit to Rajiv Gandhi Mahila Vikas Preyोजना in Sultanpur-Amethi and met Mr. Rahul Gandhi in July 2008. I was most impressed by his perception and understanding of the process of social mobilisation harnessing the potential of the people and his empathy and compassion for the poor and the down trodden and how he is determined to reach each and every poor household not only in UP but the whole of India. With such champions of poverty elimination, the goal of a poverty free country is certainly attainable. The village I visited with Mr. Gandhi, the women described the changes and transformation in their lives similar to Andhra Pradesh.