

**Social Mobilisation: A Key to Sustainable Development**  
**South Asia Experience**

**By: Shoaib Sultan Khan**  
**April 2014**

Director Mason Fellows Programme Suzanne Shende  
Edward S. Mason Programme Fellows

I am most grateful to Director Shende for inviting me to speak at the Mason Seminar. It is a great honour and privilege for me. I suspect one of the fellows Sampath Kumar is the main culprit in getting this invitation extended. I thank him profusely.

When I look back on over 60 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 35 years that I got the opportunity, thanks to His Highness the Aga Khan to fully and exclusively devote myself interacting with the communities in Pakistan, It was UNDP which brought me in contact with the communities in Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Over this period I have personally held dialogues with over 5,000 communities and this evening 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 Raiffeissen in Germany and Nineteenth Century Europe followed by Japan, Taiwan, Comilla in the then East Pakistan and South Korea's Samual 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. In 2011 in London when in my meeting with Lord Black, Executive Director of the Daily Telegraph, I explained the strategy of Social Mobilisation, he observed you succeeded because you did not plan. I clarified Yes, I did not plan, I allowed the communities to plan.

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. It reminded me what Michelangelo used to say, on being praised “I have done nothing David was hidden in the marble. I only removed the superfluous material covering it”.

They planted 50 million trees on land brought under irrigation range, generated about six megawatts of electricity through village built and managed mini-hydel 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 25% 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.

On one of my visits to Northern Areas I went to a village Ahmedabad where 22 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 from Islamabad to Kashghar in China, 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.

Despite phasing out of UNDP financed SAPAP in 2000, Government of Andhra Pradesh keeps on inviting me. During one of these visits in 2008, I also paid a visit to Rajiv Gandhi Mahila Vikas Preyोजना in Sultanpur-Amethi again engineered by Sampath Kumar and met Mr. Rahul Gandhi. 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 as follows:

The SHGs (Self Help Groups) members of Teri who had now federated in Cluster Level Association (CLA) at village level narrated their experiences since getting organised

After formation of SHGs and CLA, the women said that many of their problems have been solved. Many narrated how they were indebted borrowing money at 10% per month, now the SHG offers credit at only 2% per month, thus saving them Rs. 8 per month per Rs. 100/-. One member described how she was able to redeem her plot of land by paying off her debt through acquisition of cheap credit from her SHG. Another one described how an initial loan of Rs. 2000 from SHG for a sewing machine helped her build her credibility and subsequently enabled her to borrow money for buffalo and even a tractor. Another case study was of a member who started borrowing small sums from SHG and repaying in time graduated borrowing large sums for buffaloes which has enabled her to send her children to school for education. Another story was

of starting with a Rs. 5000 loan from SHG going upto Rs. 30,000 and now she possessed cows and buffaloes and repaid every penny of the loan. Another heartwarming story was of a women whose husband was out of job when their son fell ill. With SHG support, she got her son treated in hospital. Even her house fell down due to heavy rains but the SHG did not give up on her and helped her in every adversity to get on her feet. Today she was in a position to send her child to a good school paying Rs. 2600 fees per term quarterly.

When asked how many of the 104 households of Teri were destitutes and what the SHGs or the CLA has done for them. A couple of destitutes came forward and described how they have been helped by SHG/CLA. In one case the villager sold his land to build a house for himself and had nothing now for livelihood. The SHG was debating how to help the family for livelihood.

The women claimed to have been empowered since they got organised in SHGs and formed the CLA (Cluster Level A). One of their members complained against her husband for maltreatment and beatings. The SHG/CLA decided to act and confronted the man against his cruel behaviour towards his wife. The man threatened to beat the SHG women and shouted at them saying it was a domestic matter and none of their business. A group of thirty women went to local police station and complained against the culprit. The Police Officer came immediately and took the man away and locked him up. The next day the women asked the Police Officer to release him without registering a case against him because they only wanted to teach him a lesson. The man has been on his best hahaviour since then towards his wife and towards all the women of the village. The women stated but for their SHG/CLA, they would have suffered in silence as they used to do prior to RGMVP. Now even the Pradhan (Chairman) of the Panchayat takes them seriously if they go with any request.

In 2011 when I met Rahulji, he wanted development as a right, just as right to information, right to employment have been enacted. He was fully convinced that the SHG and the institutions of the people built on it are like a computer which have the capacity to absorb any

programme you feed in. He envisioned in the future the framework of grassroots institutions playing an important and vital role in rural-urban migration in a planned way.

In 1982 when I had initiated the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) based on development principles enunciated by Raiffeisen in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe and learnt by me under the tutelage of Akhter Hameed Khan (AHK), it was not in my wildest dreams that the efficacy and universality and applicability of these principles would be proven from Gilgit-Baltistan to Gwadar, from Peshawar to Tharparkar, from Andhra Pradesh to Uttar Pradesh. In a nutshell, Raiffeisen had advocated ORGANISATION, CAPITAL GENERATION and HUMAN SKILLS DEVELOPMENT.

When UNDP brought me to India as Adviser to the South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme (SAPAP), I was only in search of a professional who could lead the programme. I was lucky to find K. Raju, an Indian Administrative Service officer, thanks to the then Secretary to the Prime Minister Mr. Venugopal, and the rest is history as to what happened in Andhra Pradesh. I see the repetition of history in Uttar Pradesh (UP) and the beginning has been made by the Project and Rahul Gandhi was very far sighted in selecting Sampath Kumar to steer the programme. The management and field staff I interacted with greatly impressed me with their understanding of the approach of the programme and complete dedication and commitment to fostering institutions of the people and letting women be in the driving seat in implementing the programme. In this way, Sampath has chiselled a truly social mobilization programme envisaged by Raiffeisen and Akhter Hameed Khan (AHK).

Given my personal involvement in the process leading up to the establishment of these programmes, my observations should not be viewed as 'performance assessment' or academic analysis. Rather, they represent an attempt by *practitioners* to draw lessons from the experience of successful programmes. These lessons are most relevant for pro-poor programmes in South Asian countries—because of similarities in institutional, social, cultural, and economic conditions—but the general observations and background are likely to be of use more broadly.

The origins of the two programmes, SERP and Jeevika, in Bihar, the reformulation of Rajiv Gandhi Women Development Project in 2008, can be traced back to the UNDP-sponsored South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme (SAPAP). This programme was a response to a call by the Independent South Asia Commission on Poverty Alleviation set up by SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) Heads of State in 1991. The UNDP invited me to lead the operationalization of this programme across all of South Asia, specifically by building upon the lessons learned from the Pakistani rural support experience, and aiming for the empowerment of women through social mobilization.

The fundamental objective of social mobilization is to foster institutions of the poor; this is its real niche and every activity undertaken is a means to this end; it should be aimed as an investment in institution building.

In 2013 on the invitation of SERP, JEEVIKA and Union Ministry of Rural Development, I again visited India.

The eminent development economist Rehman Sobhan notes in his comprehensive treatise, that while there has been a long tradition of self-help groups in South Asia, and especially in Andhra Pradesh, very few of them demonstrated the capacity to expand beyond the limits imposed by the local resource base. Just as the Grameen Bank was able to reach out to the larger network of financial institutions, SAPAP was able to access national and international resources, both financial and institutional.

**Resource mobilization:** These 'external resources' include the support from and ownership by the state government, as manifested in the establishment of an independent organization, the SERP, chaired by the Chief Minister to manage the programme. This official patronage by the state government enabled it to draw upon the resources of the central government, including the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural development (NABARD), which recognized the potential of the self-help groups (SHGs) to channel credit to hitherto unreachable groups. Finally, this confidence in the effectiveness of the model led to support by the World Bank, which provided a loan of \$134 million in 2000, followed by a second loan



of \$275 million in 2003, to take it to scale. This followed a visit by the then World Bank Vice President Mieko Nishimizu, to Andhra Pradesh at the invitation of the state government in 1999. After a first-hand introduction to the work of SHGs in Kurnool district, Dr. Nishimizu stated publicly to state government representatives that she had seen 'UNDP's Miracle' and was confident that the World Bank would be willing to support the scaling up of the programme to a statewide level.

**Political continuity:** At the time of the inception of the SAPAP programme, Andhra Pradesh was ruled by the Telugu Desam Party (TDP), led by Chandrababu Naidu; in 2004, the TDP lost the elections to the Indian National Congress (INC) led by Y. S. Rajasekhara Reddy (YSR), and after his death in 2010, by Kiran Kumar Reddy (KKR). Unlike other countries, however, the changes in political governments did not impede the progress of the poverty eradication programme. In fact, the successive Congress governments in 2004 (YSR) and (2010) KKR took SERP to new heights. The late YSR gave the biggest incentive to SHGs to access capital from commercial banks by offering to reimburse 75 percent of the interest on timely repayment of the loan to the banks. KKR increased the guarantee to 100 percent. As a result, in 2013 the SHGs accessed IRs 100 billion in interest free loans from banks. Such incentives helped in expanding the scale of the programmes, and by 2011 over eleven million rural women had gotten organized in various community organizations (SHGs/VOs/MMSs).

It is no less than a miracle that in Andhra since 1996 the political commitment, despite changes in government has been as strong as ever in fact becoming more and more steadfast and deeper in supporting SERP.

**Leadership:** The late Dr. Akhter Hameed Khan used to say 'You don't replicate programmes; you replicate people'. SERP has been extremely fortunate in attracting leaders of the highest caliber, starting with the first National Project Coordinator, K. Raju, as well as his able successors, Vijay Kumar and Budithi Rajsekhar, both IAS officers. The success of the programme created a demand for their services at the national level. Not surprisingly, Raju was appointed to the National Advisory Council chaired by Smti Sonia Gandhi. This created enormous apprehensions about the future of SERP, but Raju's successor, Vijay Kumar

allayed the fears by demonstrating continued success in the programme. Vijay Kumar was called to Delhi to serve in the Ministry of Rural Development. His departure created similar anxieties about the future of SERP, but his successor, Rajsekhar has again laid the anxieties to rest. I was immensely inspired and impressed by what he has achieved already and how seems to be improving upon it all the time. In 2011, when the Indian Planning Commission approved replication of the Andhra Programme countrywide, Vijay Kumar was appointed Director of the Programme called National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM).

## **Replication**

In 2013, I noticed that the innovative step SERP has taken for the expansion and replication of the programme (both within the State and to other States) is to train the community resource persons (CRPs) in pilot areas and then deploy them in new areas. This is called the Resource Block Strategy. More generally, the capacity building of the CRPs has been the most effective strategy for the expansion and replication of the programme not only within this State but now in States like Bihar, UP, Kashmir Uttarkand, Chattisgarh, and Jharkand.

## **NRLM**

I must make particular mention of the enlightened leadership provided by the Indian Minister of Rural Development, Jairam Ramesh. Of the national politicians, he was the first to recognize the potential of what was being done in Andhra and gave it his full support. He has also institutionalized the replication of the programme through the NRLM.

NRLM aims to cover 6,000 Blocks, 700,000 Villages in the next five to seven years. It is addressing the challenges of convergence with elected local (Panchayati Raj) institutions and the government departments besides NGOs. It has engaged an NGO *Pradhan* to facilitate convergence with the NGOs.

## **Lessons**

Let me now turn to a few lessons from this most inspiring visit. I will frame the lessons in terms of the comparison with the Pakistan programme.

Recall that the Pakistan rural support programmes are older than the Indian programmes by at least a decade. These programmes are widely acknowledged to be highly successful, and in fact provided the model and the inspiration for the Indian programme. Yet, it must be admitted that the Indian programme, especially the one in Andhra Pradesh has been able to go beyond its source of inspiration in terms of coverage as well as achievements. Why has this been the case?

First, it is clear that long-term political commitment and support for the strategy of social mobilization in India has helped achieve miraculous results. The fact that this support was able to transcend a major political transition is most exemplary. Poverty eradication is a common political agenda and should unite rather than divide political protagonists.

Second, because of the political support and ownership, India has been able to build a top class pool of professionals largely from government, whose commitment, dedication and sensitivity towards plight of the poor made a success of the programmes like SERP, Jeevika and Rajiv Gandhi Women Development Project. Raju laid the foundation of SERP and his mission was carried forward by Vijay and currently by Rajsekhar and in Rajiv Gandhi Women Development Project by Sampath. In nearly two decades of its existence, the leadership of SERP has seen only two changes. But for Raju there would have been no SERP. Arvind Kumar, mentored by Vijay is following the path of SERP in Bihar. I do wish and hope he stays for a minimum of another five years to follow in the footsteps of SERP.

Third, the sustained governmental support has also translated into a cascading of institutional development. Unlike Pakistan, NRLM is a mainstream programme of Government of India, which can nurture and invest in state programmes. This provides it both legitimacy and viability. This support is visible in the personal commitments expressed by the Union Minister for Rural Development, Jairam Ramesh, as well as the top leaders of the ruling Congress Party, Smti Sonia Gandhi, and Rahul Gandhi. In a mature democracy, governments and leaders can change, but if the example of Andhra Pradesh has something to teach us, it is that the commitment to poverty eradication will survive all such transitions.

Fourth, the innovative element that has evolved from SAPAP through SERP, and now NRLM, namely the CRP-based model of saturation and cloning, is itself worthy of emulation and cloning.

Finally, and above all, the programme owes its success in working only with women; in Pakistan by contrast the ratio of women's participation is stagnating at 48 percent. Above all it is the women of Andhra who not only blazed the trail in their own state but also in other states and did it with extraordinary success and dynamism. I was gratified to note that the women of Bihar are equally vibrant, dynamic and resourceful as are in UP.

We have heard the slogan 'Incredible India'. For many people it refers to the wealth of tourist attractions in the country. What we found, however, is that more than its tourist attractions, India is incredible because of the depth of its commitment to the poor, revealed by the words and actions of myriads of thought leaders and activists, the Jairams, Rahuls, Reddys, Rajus, Vijays, Sampaths, Rajsekharas, and Arvinds, but above all the amazing rural women of Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

The women of Pakistan have no less potential. Unlike Union and State governments in India, the women in Pakistan have not received support on the scale they deserve. Last month I visited a remote rural area in Southern Punjab of Pakistan where National Rural Support Programme (NRSP) of Pakistan has been implementing a Social Mobilisation programme since 2009. Taking a lesson from the Indian experience, NRSP organized only women and by now had 350,000 women households organized in COs/VOs/LSOs. In the LSO (Local Support Organisation), I was visiting when at the end of her presentation, I asked the lady why are you doing all this without any monetary benefit, in reply she recited the verse of a Sufi Poet of the area which exactly meant what I had read written by Tolstoy "The only certain happiness in life is when you live for others".

Thank you