

Pro-Poor Interventions in Rural Areas of the Punjab: Experience from the Punjab Rural Support Program in Pakistan

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POVERTY IN PUNJAB

Poverty, a state of deprivation and destitution, is a primitive predicament. People of the Punjab have been suffering from this since time immemorial. Kings, Sultans, Maharajas, Rajas and then the British— whosoever ruled this land of five rivers plundered the poor and made their plight pitiable. Evidence of such extreme exploitations and grave injustices is not difficult to gather. It can easily be found in the books of history or traced from the folk traditions and the Sufi poetry of the previous centuries. This abysmal situation continued unabated till the departure of the British Raj. At the dawn of independence, people dreamed that this state of poverty, which reflects in hunger, disease, ignorance and vulnerability, would wither away and an era of prosperity will usher henceforth. This however did not happen and the people continued to plunge in deep poverty. Destitution was their destiny and it continued to remain so. Successive regimes whether political or military, claimed to take many initiatives but these hardly made any visible impact and every passing day found hundreds of people falling below the poverty line. This failure to mitigate the plight of the poor can be attributed to many factors like utilitarianism, political patronage, lack of accountability; conventional top-bottom approaches, and perceiving the poor as a liability and failure to harness their potential. Parallel to these state-led development efforts, few development professionals were also busy devising a strategy suited to the local genius and responsive to indigenous needs and aspirations. One such initiative originated in Comilla, now in Bangladesh, under the guidance of an eminent scholar and civil servant Mr. Akhtar Hameed Khan. Benefiting from the principles of Raiffeissen, a German thinker, who worked for the salvation of the poor villagers of Germany, Dr. Akhtar Hameed Khan developed a theoretical framework aiming at rural development and the upliftment of poor farmers. This framework is based on participatory development approach, which seeks to organize the rural poor, around their common interests and felt needs, in small groups and then to serve them through these groups in a permanent and profitable manner. Daudzai in NWFP and Orangi in Karachi followed Comilla. These initiatives culminated in the emergence of Agha Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and National Rural Support Programme (NRSP) supported by Agha Khan Foundation and Government of Pakistan, respectively. Both these programs operate on the basis of a time-tested premise that people have the willingness and ability to change their lives and a sincere leadership is also available at the local level to help them come out of poverty. These organizations perceive their role as support entities that are responsible for providing social guidance during this entire process of development.

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PUNJAB RURAL SUPPORT PROGRAM (PRSP)

Inspired by the success of AKRSP and NRSP, the Government of Punjab decided to finance the establishment of an organization based on the same principles. The overarching objective was to reduce poverty and enhance the quality of life of the rural poor in the Province. The organization was named as Punjab Rural Support Programme (PRSP) and it came into existence in June 1998. Government of Punjab donated Rs.500 million as a one-time grant and it was registered under Section 42 of the Companies Ordinance 1984 as an apolitical, nongovernmental private organization. This arrangement has been made to save it from political interference and bureaucratic muddling. There is a board of directors responsible for policy formulation and budgetary allocation. The program implementation is then accomplished through a team of professionals headed by Regional General Managers.

PRSP started operations in eight regions of the Province: Faisalabad, Gujranwala, Lahore, Multan, Muzaffargarh, Narowal, Sahiwal and Sargodha. Together, these regions will cover 19 districts. So far, the program has been launched in 11 districts. Brief description of conceptual and operating principles being followed by PRSP is given hereunder.

GOAL

PRSP's goal is alleviation of poverty and improvement in the quality of life of the rural poor.

STRATEGY

PRSP works on the belief that the poor have the potential to improve their lot. The program strategy is to harness that potential.

PRIORITIES

PRSP puts people before things, children before adults, women before men, the poor before the rich, the weak before the powerful and the vulnerable before the secure.

PRINCIPLES

PRSP believes that the lot of the poor can be improved through self-help. It rejects the traditional concept of self-help synonymous with the poor providing the free labor only.

PRSP considers self-help as the willingness of the poor to organize, to generate their own capital through savings and to take full responsibility for the management of local affairs. Self-help breeds self-reliance which is the key for human progress.

Basic tenets of PRSP are social organization, capital formation, capacity building or skill enhancement of the rural poor and linking them to government agencies, NGOs, donors and private businesses for better service delivery and enhancing their options and opportunities. PRSP does not offer any pre-conceived package of interventions. It is the people who identify and prioritize their needs. Starting point of PRSP interventions is the development of individual household. Focus on individual household is the key for galvanizing the community into a large whole. Once an individual household accomplishes its objectives and realizes its potential the group and community level activities start ensuing swiftly.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Social Mobilization

The starting point for PRSP interventions is social mobilization. Social mobilization paves the way for all subsequent efforts and interventions. It is a process of organizing people into homogenous groups to enable them to utilize their potentials for their own development. Social mobilization is the key to the participatory development approach. Nothing substantial can be achieved unless people are organized and blended into an institutional framework. It is only through organization that people pool their resources, achieve economies of scale, forge common understanding amongst them and resolve internal conflicts by consensus. This process engenders a sense of collective responsibility among the poor to shape their destiny themselves. By organizing the poor into community organizations (COs), PRSP attempts to tap the unexplored potential and reinvigorate the dormant abilities of the poor. PRSP has been able to organize nearly one hundred thousand households in five thousand community organizations (COs). Out of these more than fifteen hundred COs comprise of rural women. Having folded within an organizational network, these COs have started undertaking development activities through mutual consultation and participation.

Micro-Credit

The role of micro-credit in poverty alleviation can never be overemphasized. It has helped millions of people in their struggle against poverty and powerlessness. It is certainly not a panacea but arguably the most effective tool for poverty reduction. Micro-credit has taken the bank to the doorsteps of the poor and exposed the old myth that the poor are not bankable and creditworthy. PRSP extends credit to the rural poor without any physical or economic collateral. These loans are being disbursed to the poor villagers for various purposes like agriculture-inputs, small enterprise, livestock and productive infrastructure development. In

a survey carried out by the PRSP, beneficiaries of Livestock credit reported an average increase of Rs.1,729 in their monthly income while beneficiaries of Enterprise credit reported an average increase of Rs. 3,978 per month. They spent the extra money on food; health and education of their children besides saving some amount for the future need as well. Apart from assisting the rural poor to create their own assets, the micro-credit provided through PRSP helped them to free themselves from the clutches of local moneylenders who charge exorbitant interest rates. The beneficiaries of group lending for the fertilizer succeeded in increasing their farm productivity and hence their income. Similarly, the credit for physical infrastructure schemes like construction of disposal ponds, drains and sewers improved the health standards of the villagers and also gave them a sense of self-confidence to improve the quality of their lives collectively.

CAPACITY BUILDING/SKILL ENHANCEMENT/HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

PRSP believes that upgrading of human skills of the poor is essential to enable them to make best use of available resources. While the poor have skills and a traditional knowledge base, these need to be built upon so that new profitable opportunities can be realized. PRSP attempts to enhance the capabilities of the rural poor by imparting three types of training; managerial or leadership, technical and vocational. So far one thousand training events have been arranged where fourteen thousand men and women have acquired various skills. These skills have harnessed their abilities and enhanced their productivity. The beneficiaries of these trainings are now more confident and committed citizens, and exploit, their potential for individual and collective benefits. This is for the first time that such a large cadre of village activists have been trained and employed gainfully.

NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Inefficient use of water, land, seeds, fertilizers and other agriculture inputs is a common practice in our villages resulting in low productivity and high losses. Livestock and Poultry Management, Fruit and Vegetable Farming and other relevant areas have also suffered due to poor service delivery and wasteful techniques. PRSP aims to increase the income of farmers by helping them overcome such problems. PRSP's operational strategy in this regard includes both palliative as well as preventive measures. It emphasizes a balance between growth and conservation, it also aims to sensitize the government line agencies about the importance of integrating rural community for natural resource management. PRSP also facilitates awareness building among the communities through information dissemination and organizing different activities such as field days and workshop in agriculture, livestock and poultry farming. Establishing Guidance and Demonstration (GD) plots is also part of the strategy to create cognizance and inspiration among the farmers.

LINKAGES

People are poor because they are isolated. Linking the rural poor with the mainstream is the most crucial element for poverty reduction. The major objective of these linkages is to remove the age-old isolation, powerlessness and vulnerability of the poor. PRSP acts like a bridge or a conduit through which goods and services start reaching the far-flung rural areas. Weakness of service delivery mechanism makes these links far more important. Regular contacts with departments like Agriculture, Livestock and Dairy development, and Fishery, Forestry and Poultry management have been established and resulted in the improvement of farmers' productivity. Such links are not confined to the public sector only. Efforts have also been made to bring the private sector in close proximity to the rural population.

SOCIAL SECTOR SERVICES

PRSP is well aware of the indispensability of health and education sectors, which along with the family planning are the major thrust of its social sector services. Health and education are valued not only for their intrinsic worth but also for their positive impacts—direct and indirect—on human capital, productivity and capabilities for participation and social interaction. These are also inter-linked and inter-dependent. Evidence has shown that higher level of maternal education improves the nutrition status of children. Studies in South Asia revealed that the rate of under nutrition is as much as 20 percent lower among children of women who have gone no further than primary level education. After assessment of needs in the target area, PRSP has been able to set-up one hundred community schools where six thousand students are studying. These girls and boys come from that unfortunate lot that never gets the opportunity to visit a school. Similarly many breakthroughs have been made in the health sector. Arranging health camps, providing family planning and immunization services, imparting first aid and basic health trainings are major interventions that have benefited more than thirty thousand poor people.

FUTURE DIRECTION

There may not be consensus on the ways and means to fight against poverty but everyone believes that the task of poverty alleviation needs a long and committed effort. It is like scaling a high mountain and treading on a tight rope. In a short span of three years PRSP has been able to kindle a light of hope in the hearts of the poor inhabitants of the Punjab. It has demonstrated that the old principle of self-help still holds true. PRSP is not trying to reinvent the wheel. It is just reiterating the time-tested principle of participation and faith in people's potential and abilities. What we are doing is to harness the willingness of the people for alleviating economic and social poverty through participation and mutual support. We believe that this can be achieved only through a sincere and committed local leadership and in the

presence of a support organization. Community based institutional development at village level is not an end in itself. It is a means to the end of bringing about meaningful changes in the quality of lives of the rural poor. The continuing challenge for us is to adapt and innovate our interventions to remain responsive to the changing and dynamic needs of the rural people. It is in fact the people who will make this world a poverty free place, the most cherished goal of every development professional and support organization.