



2019 NATIONAL CONVENTION OF LSOs

June 29, 2019 | Islamabad

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Introduction

Local Support Organisations (LSOs) are central to the social mobilisation approach of the Rural Support Programmes (RSPs). In a bid to reduce poverty and empower marginalised people (especially women), the RSPs mobilise people into a three-tiered structure, which consists of Community Organisations (COs) – at the neighbourhood level, Village Organisations (VOs) – at the village level, and LSOs – at the Union Council level.

As the tertiary level, LSOs are uniquely able to develop linkages with government and non-government organisations, donor agencies and the private sector to reduce poverty at the household level. CEO-RSPN Ms. Shandana Humayun Khan explained LSOs by claiming, “We may talk of institutions linking into government but we must appreciate that these institutions are independent. They are run by the people. So we [RSPs] are investing in civil society. The key thing really for us is how this network of institutions stays vibrant and what options they make for themselves apart from working with the government. Our investment is in people and in people’s institutions”.

To showcase the achievements of these 2,015 LSOs, a National Convention of LSOs is organised by Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN) and Rural Support Programmes (RSPs) every year. Their achievements are advocated to a broader set of stakeholders including policy makers, government authorities, donor agencies and non-government organisations (NGOs) from across the country. The convention provides an opportunity for community activists in the field to share their experiences, challenges faced and lessons learnt. This year, the convention was held on June 29th, 2019 in Islamabad and celebrated 11 years of LSO conventions organised by RSPN.

The two biggest achievements of LSOs were primarily discussed at the convention. The first dealt with the role of LSOs in graduation from poverty especially for the most disempowered people mainly women, through fostering social mobilisation in Pakistan. The second demonstrated the role of LSOs in improving access to public sector services by establishing synergies and accountability with local governments. Listening to local government officials, researchers and community members of LSOs give their experiences and achievements, urged international donors and senior government politicians to appreciate the work carried out by LSOs. In the presence of the media Mr. Jean-François Cautain, Ambassador of the European Union to Pakistan, his wife Sonia Cautain; Mr. Sartaj Aziz, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs; and Mr. Shoaib Sultan Khan, Chairman RSPN advocated for the sustainability of Community Institutions in the country.

Graduation from poverty through social mobilisation

Community Institutions, especially LSOs, promote socio-economic development and empower people (especially women) in Pakistan. A major theme that emerged from the convention this year was the LSO's unique ability to reach out to the poorest households and support them in economically empowering themselves through social mobilisation. Social mobilisation is a process whereby people are organised in order to enable them to collectively think and act upon their development.

Individual economic impact

LSOs achieve graduation from poverty for individual community members directly through economic interventions such as Income Generating Grants (IGG) and Community Investment Funds (CIF). Although the amount might be limited, but by allowing people (especially women) to decide their own income generating activities greatly increases their financial situation.



This was especially elaborated in the case of Ms. Shahjahan from District Shikarpur, where in ten years of forming Community Institutions in her area her household Poverty Score Card (PSC) increased from 10 to 32 as a result of RSPs helping her setting up a fish farming business, with an initial grant of Rs. 5,000. She further added that the number of poorest households in Shikarpur had decreased from 127 to 2 between the years 2009 and 2019.

The process through which these funds and grants create economic empowerment is by investing in livestock or a small-run business that impact their lives. This can be seen in the case of Nadia from Kambar Shahdadkot who explained that despite suffering from a disability, she was able to improve her family situation financially. "I got 12,000 rupees in CIF and bought a goat. The goat gave birth to two additional goats. I sold one of the goat and returned the loan. The two goats have increased my family's asset base".

Communal economic impact

These interventions also impact women in the most conservative parts of the country where strict social and cultural norms restrict even the most basic mobility, perpetuating the cycle of poverty. Zubaida Bibi from District Loralai, Balochistan and Ayesha Bibi from District Lower Dir, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, elaborated how social mobilisation and economic interventions have not only benefitted individual women but impacted the whole society despite strict *purdah* rules.



Ayesha Bibi enthusiastically explained in Pashto “Most women in my village had never even seen the local market! However, now they go all the way to the main market for processing, marketing or selling olive products. They have successfully learnt how to make jams, *achar*, *murhaba* and green tea from olive leaves. Through these trainings, we gained confidence to stand and speak out”.

A representative from each province gave the audience a snapshot profile of all Community-Driven Development strategies that LSOs were implementing in rural areas with provincial governments that were giving women and families a fighting chance at economic success through education, health, and infrastructure.

To further target communal impact to tackle poverty, programmes such as Water, Immunisation, Sanitation and Education (WISE) have been initiated that utilise the three-tier structure of social mobilisation to provide services. WISE as the name suggests targets the social sector more directly and simultaneously contributes in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The programme has been able to meet their targets effectively. For example, explaining the water component of WISE, Ms. Allahdini from District Tando Muhammad Khan said “As part of the intervention, people were provided with awareness sessions, water testing was carried out and sources of water were colored to identify sources with water fit for consumption. As a result of these measures, the prevalence of water-borne diseases and skin diseases have reduced and people are saving in health related expenses. Overall, the access of safe drinking water has increased to 1,284 households in our union council”.



Access to public sector services

Poverty is not limited to economic aspects such as material needs, including basic necessities of daily living, such as food, clothing, shelter or safe drinking water. There is a social aspect of poverty that includes education and health care. LSOs have been successful in establish links and holding the government accountable to provide social services to their communities. This was showcased through three panel discussions on EU and Government of KP's Community Driven Local Development (CDLD) programme and Joint Development Committees (JDC) formed under the EU funded Sindh Union Council and Community Economic Strengthening Support (SUCCESS) programme in Sindh.

Synergies with the government in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

With EU's financial assistance, Community Driven Local Development (CDLD) programme is designed by the Government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to link public service providers and recipients of these services together. This allows a broad range of community infrastructure projects to be undertaken. Mr. Arshad Iqbal the President of an LSO in Shangla explored the role of Community Institutions in linking with the government for developmental projects claiming, "A total of 24 projects have been executed, costing Rs. 38 million, benefitting 15,360 people in my district".

The panel discussion was an experience-sharing discussion of community leaders with CDLD officials from KP. The need and use of CDLD was explained well by Mr. Khalid Khan from SRSP. He said that from 2007-2009 terrorism and militancy was rife in Malakand Division. In 2009 the army decided to start an operation there causing mass displacement of people. After the operation finished the army asked people to return to their homes. The government and army wanted to develop the area, however, there was trust deficit between people and government institutions. He said, "The government and the communities agreed that community driven development was the solution. Three principles on which the government agreed were: community participation in decision making; transparency, accountability and responsiveness; and inclusivity. The government ended up supporting Community Institutions as they lacked resources".

Representing the government, Dr. Sardar ul Mulk had similar sentiments and thought that LSOs had the opportunity to garner public-private partnership. He expressed "I am glad that representatives of rural communal development have started a partnership with us [local government] to achieve sustainability. I hope that mutual collaboration of LSOs and the government becomes an example of a success story."



Synergies with the government in Sindh

The panel discussion with community leaders continued with Joint Development Committee (JDC) members from Sindh. The key objective of the JDCs is to create synergies between the Community Institutions, local administration/departments, and externally supported development investment in the districts.

Explaining the operations of the JDC, Mr. Azam Brohi (Deputy Director Livestock, District Kambar Shahdaskot) said “The representatives of the JDC from different areas share their problems for example with access to drinking water, roads or health facilities in the JDC meetings. Members of the line department note these problems and try to solve them with the related department”.

JDCs clearly provide a link between government officials and communities especially those that are most disenfranchised such as rural women to provide social services. This was demonstrated by LSO members that spoke at the panel. One such experience was shared by Ms. Iffat Batool from LSO Ibtida. Initially she was discouraged from speaking out but she took a stand and told the entire JDC that she will fight for her rights. She complained that there wasn't a mother and child health facility in her area. She explained “After sharing the issue at a JDC meeting, it was noted by the authorities. Within 15 days two Lady Health Workers (LHWs) were arranged by the District Commissioner”.



Adding to the discussion, Chairman RSPN Mr. Shoaib Sultan Khan said that through JDCs communities can reach out to government departments. However, it is the government's responsibility to serve the communities and provide them services.

Accountability of the local government

It seemed that along with establishing links, Community Institutions have to hold the government accountable in providing social services. Specifically considering education, a robust panel discussion on the role of LSOs in social accountability of local authorities was arranged for panelists to learn from each other experiences. Ms. Humera Hussain, Team Leader Waseela-e-Taleem (WeT) project of Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), opened the floor with explaining the “Demanding Access to Quality Education” campaign. Funded by the Foundation Open Society Institute – Pakistan (FOSIP), the campaign aimed to empower communities to raise voices to access quality education, to have community-led accountability for improvement in school conditions and learning outcomes and to have community actions for enrolment of out of school children.

To achieve its aim, the campaign was heavily supported by the LSOs, as Ms. Hussain explained, “They [LSOs] collected the data which was one of the important part of the programme”. This data on the status of schools was shared with education departments, while simultaneously meetings were held with politicians at the local, provincial and federal level, and media personnel took place. This was then utilised to make a charter of demands. A particular panel discussion to have LSO representatives share the challenges they faced during the survey and lessons learnt when increasing enrolment in schools was undertaken.

Most speakers admitted that one of the biggest challenge was towards female enrolment. Ms. Ruqia Bano, District Rajanpur explained, “The main issue we faced during the survey was that people were not ready to give data of their daughters...However, with the help of community notables we were able to solve this issue and collect the data”.

The campaign proved to be successful as each speaker reiterated their local achievements in their regions. Ms. Jannat, member LSO Kamyabi, District Jamshoro claimed “We were able to open 13 schools which were closed. We were already working with the mothers of the children in the *tanzeem* [Community Institution] which made it easy for us to motivate them to send their children school”. Mr. Imdad Ali, member LSO Raju Nizmani, District Tando Muhammad Khan added “There were 218 schools which were closed for a number of years. We were able to open 19 schools with the help of the education department, where we provided 19 volunteer teachers”.



Advocacy

LSO's commitment to have the poorest households rise from poverty has been appreciated and witnessed by senior government officials and international donors alike. This support was advocated to a broader set of stakeholders including researchers, policy makers, government authorities, donor agencies, non-government organisations (NGOs) and media personnel from across the country. Recommendations were also offered by these notable speakers to further improve the impact of LSOs.

A research study conducted by Lahore School of Economics (LSE) titled "Incentivising development - a field experiment with LSOs in Pakistan" was shared at the convention by Ms. Fatima Qamar, Research Assistant at the LSE. The study conducts a randomised experiment to test the impact of different factors on the performance of LSOs. Performance of LSOs are measured on (i) governance and inclusion via active participation of men and women in executive and general bodies of LSOs and (ii) services provided by LSOs in various sectors including health, education, agriculture, disaster preparedness, employment/livelihood and legal rights. A baseline survey has been conducted, which included a total of 851 LSOs out of which 700 LSOs are fostered by RSPs and rest by other partner organisations of Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF). Ms. Qamar shared the findings of the baseline with the convention participants that were focused on the current governance structure of the LSOs. According to the baseline findings:

- 52% of the LSOs Executive Body (EB) held meeting on monthly basis and 25% twice in a month and around 15% of LSOs once in 2-4 months. Around half of the EB meetings

are held on LSOs' owned or rented offices while half of the LSOs have their meeting either in members' house or office owned by LSO members

- Around of 20% of LSOs General Body held a meeting once a month, 12% held a meeting twice a month, 40% LSOs once in 2-4 months and 18% of LSOs once in a year
- 52% of the LSOs elected their EB members once in 2 years, 34% once in a year, 6% once in six months and 8% have no regular election process in place. 60% of the LSOs use open voting, 19% secret balloting and 21% use consensus decision making process among members to elect the EB members. In 30% of the LSOs 100% of the EB members were re-selected; in 12% LSOs 76-99% of the EB members were re-selected; in 40% of the LSOs 26-75% of the EB members were re-selected; in 10% of the LSOs 1-25% of the EB Members were re-selected; and in 8% of the LSOs none of EB members were re-selected.

In the next phase the research team will do a follow up survey to measure the services provided by the LSOs to its members and also understand the problems that LSOs face and how they can resolve these issues. To demonstrate their support for LSOs, Ms. Qamar further added “My team will be running workshops for LSO members on making applications and developing proposals for projects in future”.

Mr. Sartaj Aziz, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, praised the efforts of the representatives of the LSOs. He continued “80 lakh households are now impacted by RSPs which is roughly one-fourth of the population of Pakistan. Clearly, this is a great achievement. Community Institutions are not only growing in number but also increasingly involve women which is the secret to the programme's success”.



He went on to provide two major recommendations for the LSOs to develop further by focussing on IT as it is a source of empowerment and high value marketing. He also called for BISP to use the successful approaches developed by the RSPs in collaboration with the communities to design its poverty graduation programme.

By far one of the biggest supporters of Community Institutions in Pakistan has been the European Union by actively providing funds for programmes such as Sindh Union Council and Community Economic Strengthening Support (SUCCESS), Balochistan Rural Development and Community Empowerment (BRACE) and Community Driven Local Development (CDLD) in KP.



The Chief Guest, Mr. Jean-François Cautain, Ambassador of the European Union to Pakistan claimed that RSP's work had given voice to the voiceless and developed capacities and skills. An essential component of development was that 50% of the population which comprises of women are also part of it. His wife Sonia Cautain also shared her views and experience of working with the LSOs. "I was challenged in my own thinking to see the difficulties and obstacles that all of you [LSO members] are facing every day and want to help you get them resolved".

The LSO Convention was able to achieve its objective successfully by providing a platform for voices that celebrate the achievements of LSOs to a far wider audience, so poverty graduation may extend at a higher scale. The convention also proved to be an opportunity as a farewell to Ambassador Mr. Jean-François Cautain and Ms. Sonia Cautain. His tireless contribution to the agenda of RSPs was going to be missed as Mr. Shoaib Sultan Khan, Chairman RSPN expressed "In my long development journey, I rarely came across an ambassador who would support me like Ambassador Cautain did".





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