Partnerships with Communities for Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM)

By:
Shoaib Sultan Khan
1. Lessons from life-long experience

Last July, I completed over 49 years of full time employment of which I spent 25 years in Government, 12 years with an NGO, the Aga Khan Foundation, 12 years with United Nations including last 8 years with UNDP. The last 20 years have been the most satisfying and continue to be so. I am now associated with over 50,000 communities encompassing over two million households as members representing almost 10 to 15 million people in six countries of South Asia. I have personally held dialogues with over 5,000 communities in six countries and I intend to share this experience with you.

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 (AKRSP) 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 organization to help them unleash their potential. Once organized the men and women took their destiny in their own hands. They knew what would bring them out of poverty. AKRSP trained thousands of villagers as service providers, managers of their organizations, together with these villagers it identified, constructed and maintained thousands of physical infrastructure works – irrigation channels, link roads, sprinkler irrigation, flood protection works, school buildings etc, increased their productive capacity, planted 30 million trees on land brought under irrigation range, generated about two megawatts of electricity through village built and managed mini-hydel s and accumulated over Rupees eight hundred million as their savings and credit fund.

In 1993 at a World Bank organized workshop on South Asia Poverty Alleviation at Annapolis in USA, the UNDP Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific launched the South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme known as SAPAP with the concurrence of the six Governments of the SAARC countries. His Highness the Aga Khan released me from AKRSP to work for UNDP. During this assignment I experienced a similar phenomenon visiting rural poor of Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal and Sri Lanka as I had in Northern Areas of Pakistan in 1983.
In the Rashidabad Union Parishad of Kishoregunj Thana, Bangladesh in 1994 abject poverty stared me in the face in that paradise of a setting. In less then four years I witnessed a sea of changes in the condition of the people. A World Bank commissioned study showed that as compared to the national poverty reduction average of 0.3 % annually, in Kishoregunj Thana under SAPAP the poverty reduction was 3 % per annum. I do not believe in statistics but I do believe my eyes. Those very men and especially women who had no smile on their faces and no glint in their eyes and no hope for the future are in a different world altogether. Their prosperity, happiness, enthusiasm and vision of the future can only be shared first hand. Of course not everything has been achieved; a lot still remains to be done. However, SAPAP has demonstrated that poverty can be reduced and ultimately eliminated if Governments and Donors make a long term commitment to empowering people through the process of social mobilization.

It was the greatest challenge to SAPAP to make an impact on the lives of women and their households in India being the largest country in the region. The 20 Mandals which SAPAP took up as demonstration area for empowerment of women and poverty reduction have an important story to tell today after only five years of project operation. I had never seen such a tremendous transformation in the lives of the people, especially the women, not only in terms of economic empowerment but in every aspect of life than during my last visit to Andhra Pradesh to SAPAP Mandals. Given the opportunity and support of SAPAP these illiterate rural women demonstrated dynamism, managerial and productive skills and a sense of responsibility and sensitivity to social evils such as bonded and child labor, social discrimination, indifference or excesses of local bureaucracy that one had to see to believe it.

The Maldivians were most skeptical of SAPAP. In the capital island Male, everyone would tell me the islanders have been conditioned not to do anything themselves. On my visit to the fourteen islands of Noonu Atoll I found the islanders most willing to undertake internal development but the external development was beyond their capacity or resources.

Nepal was much like the Northern Areas of Pakistan – more difficult and more challenging but with a tremendous advantage of extremely hardworking, dynamic and totally emancipated women compared to Pakistan. My first visit to Arjun Chaupari in Syangja district, after crossing the river 22 times on Jeep left me in no doubt about the inaccessibility and isolation of the VDC. When I reached a village after a four hours strenuous walk the whole population came out to greet me. I was later told that a seventy year old (I was only 65 at that time) outsider had managed to negotiate the steep climb. In Nepal again, men and women of 7 VDCs where SAPAP worked demonstrated their potential and in a short period of five years, created the definite impression that the people of the VDC had come out of poverty.

In Sri Lanka, the people of Hanguranketha, Kotmale and Walapane demonstrated how given the opportunity and responsibility the men and especially the women can come out of poverty. The most prominent achievement in SAPAP in Sri Lanka was enterprise development and linking rural entrepreneurs and their products with Colombo super markets.
2. The Essence of the Social Mobilization Strategy

The conceptual package of the SAPAP Social Mobilization Strategy is based on the following facts, experience and results:

a. Priority to Poverty Reduction

Social Mobilization is based on the assumption that people especially the poor, landless and asset-less, are willing to do many things themselves to help improve their situation and the community as a whole is interested in helping the poor to attain their potential through:

- Social Organization: Bringing the poor into an organized 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.

b. Pro-Poor Development Policy

- Development policy is almost always about industrialization and rarely about poverty.
- Current trends of globalization are creating inequity and impoverishment
- Since 1950 global income has increased 5-fold and the world trade 12-fold.
- In Fifties, the richest fifth of the world population earned 30 times as much as the poorest one-fifth, today they earn 78 times as much.

c. Why is there Poverty in South Asia?

- Government services do not reach the people especially the poor
- Poor have been made to believe that the government will do everything for them
- Planning is top down and solutions are uniformly applied with total disregard to local needs and sustainability. This leads to:
  - Government facilities remaining non functional
  - Massive investments by the government but low impact
  - Government makes huge investments but does not create a receiving mechanism for delivery of goods and services
d. Harnessing people’s potential to help themselves

- Creating a receiving mechanism in the community requires “social guidance”. This entails:
  - helping people to organize themselves
  - identifying true and genuine activists
  - training and capacity building of village activists on a very large scale to substitute a large army of paid extension workers
  - identifying and prioritizing what people are willing to undertake in terms of opportunities and not demands.
  - undertaking feasibility of identified opportunities.
  - facilitating, arranging and securing flow of required resources for undertaking identified opportunities.
  - monitoring, lobbying on behalf of communities, establishing linkages between communities and government departments and others such as district councils, union councils, NGOs and donors.

- Social guidance cannot be undertaken by government departments or NGOs. It requires an institutional mechanism which has the credibility of the government and flexibility of an NGO

e. Standard Social Mobilization Module

A holistic model for development for IWRM includes the following:-

- Social organization
- Human resource development
- Credit and savings
- Technical assistance in natural resources management, and
- Development of physical infrastructure especially water resources development.
3. Communities and Integrated Water Resources Management

Turning specifically to IWRM, let I begin with a quote from the report on the World Commission on Dams “The debate about dams is a debate about the very meaning, purpose and pathways for achieving development”. Therefore, although the report is intended to making large dams less controversial, more acceptable to all parties involved and therefore more successful; it also states “where other options offer better solutions, they should be favored over large dams”.

We live in a developing country where finances are scarce, people are poor and 80 percent of them are scattered all over the rural areas, from the insurmountable glaciated Karakorams to the vast deserts of Sind. Of these 40 percent live below the poverty line. How many of these people are we going to reach by building large dams?

I work with the ten different Rural Support Programmes (RSPs) in Pakistan whose objective is poverty reduction through participation of the people. The priority need of almost 100 percent of these people is water. They cannot wait for mega projects to fulfill this need, nor will the resources of the country ever allow this. But people in each region do have their indigenous methods of harvesting and managing water. The RSPs work in total partnership with the people, using their knowledge of the area, their traditional methods and their capacity. It is the people, who identify, build, contribute to, and maintain these projects. The RSPs offer financial and technical support. The projects they undertake are micro projects; they are do-able, affordable and sustainable.

May I share some of the experiences with you?

In the Northern Areas of Pakistan, tapping the glaciers and digging water channels with the horn of the ibex has been their traditional method of harvesting water. These channels are called ‘kuls’. But considering the terrain, their abject poverty and lack of technical skills, how many could they make? AKRSP has been working for the last 20 years with a million people, having mobilized the village people and provided technical know-how and finances. The ibex horn was replaced with electric drills and dynamite, and manual labor with tractors where possible. This enabled the people to build 1235 kuls which have irrigated 92000 hectares of new land and plant 30 million forest trees and one million fruit trees. Exploiting their water resources they have built 150 micro-hydel, which generate 2 mega watts of electricity and at a cheaper rate than government. Almost every household has access to water and their incomes have tripled in real terms. The cost of this, including 2000 kilometers of link roads, is Pak Rupees 610 million (US $ 10 million) and the people have contributed 20-30 percent of this cost.

In the district of Kohat where Sarhad Rural Support Programme (SRSP) worked, there is a Tehsil called Lachi, which looks like the moon. It is a desert with jagged hillocks and no irrigation what so ever. But when it rains, which is mainly during the monsoon, hill torrents suddenly appear and millions of gallons of water, carrying stones, rocks and top soil, flow into the Indus with dramatic ferocity. Traditionally people dig mud ponds here to harvest water, which are multi purpose.
The Lachi Poverty Reduction Project (LPRP), an offshoot of South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme (SAPAP) works here. Traditionally, it is entirely the women’s responsibility to bring water for the household. LPRP staff reports, they have seen women who are actually bald from carrying pitchers on their heads. When SRSP first started 10 years ago, the staff asked the women for a convenient time to meet with them. The reply was “we have no time to meet you; we leave the house in the morning to fetch water and return in time to feed the family at noon. We go again in the afternoon and return in the evening”. Most of them walk 12 kms a day carrying 2 – 3 vessels to fetch water.

One day the Village Organization of Badasam, consisting of 24 households in Shakardara Union Council, identified the passage of a flash flood. A small dam was built under the guidance of LPRP engineers, which has a capacity of about 15 million gallons. Check dams were built and forest trees planted on the tributaries in the catchment area, to decrease silting of the dams. Fish are kept in the reservoir and for drinking water a well was dug 30 feet down stream from the dam. …this water is sand filtered.

Today all 24 households have piped water, sufficient for all domestic use including livestock. This year about 5 Kanals of land are being irrigated from this dam using drip irrigation by gravity flow, as a demonstration. Forest trees have been planted in the seepage from the dam.

The women no longer fetch water. They attend village organization meetings instead. They have availed of training in sewing, stitching, learnt to grow kitchen gardens, accessed credit and started small businesses. Family incomes have increased; health improved, medical expenses have come down, livestock improved.

There are 8 Union Councils in Lachi, 7 have similar possibilities. In Union Council Shakardara alone 90 dam sites have been identified, 58 have been built, costing 250,000 to 300,000 Pak Rupees each, of which the village has contributed 20 – 30 percent.

These dams will take care of all the domestic water needs and some irrigation needs of the Union Council besides preventing valuable top soil, which takes hundreds of years to form, from flowing into the Indus.

When the project feasibility was done in the village it was found that each household was spending on an average of Rs.13500 on water annually. Now each household pays Rps. 50 a month for the O&M of it.

However, every project has its negative side. It has changed the quality of life and the status of women for the better, but a maulvi (religious teacher) who is a member of Village Organization remarked “how beautiful our women used to look with their upright postures and slim waists as they walked with three pitchers on their heads. Today they are plump and cheeky”.

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In areas where cultivable land is located next to the flash flood mullah, spurs have been built in the passage of the water, in order to redirect the water to the fields, which are landscaped for a gravity flow. The beds of these mullahs are then used either for agriculture or forestry. Possibilities for this type of water harvesting do exist in many other parts of the Indus Valley.

A major part of the Chat region however is flat and arid. The Sarhad Rural Support Programme works in Kohat region. Out of a total of 89000 households in the region 37650 households are socially mobilized. 70 percent of these people prioritized water as a desperate need. Now these needs have largely been met by making dug wells, hand pumps, piping spring water, and some tube wells. Every one of these households today has water for domestic use whilst 20000 acres of land has been irrigated at a cost of Rps. 75 million. Almost every hand pump now has 5 or 6 trees in its vicinity and 30 percent of the women are using the water for vegetable gardens. They claim that in season this takes care of their family’s needs. On an average, there are 7 – 10 families to a hand pump.

These micro projects based on indigenous ways may not be as multipurpose as large dams, but if adopted as a national policy they have the potential of reaching the basic water requirements of most people; and at an affordable cost.

If the Pakistan Water Partnership is to translate its integrated water resource management vision of harvesting, saving water, recycling water and obtain more crops per drop then it will have to spread this message to every water user. It will have to develop the capacity of local government, civil society organizations, and NGOs to micro manage water in their own particular way, under their own particular circumstances.