A network approach to scaling social mobilisation in Pakistan
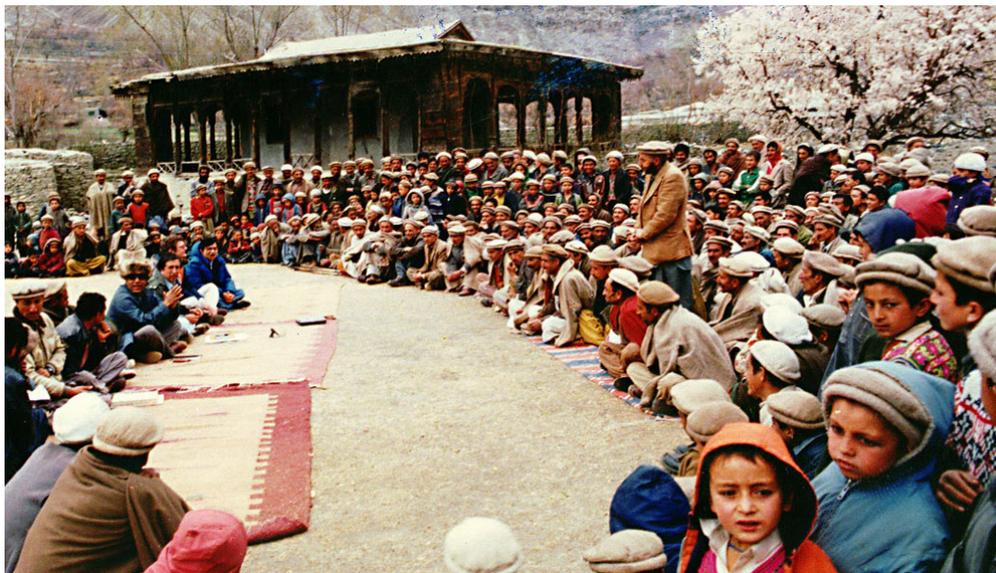
The purpose of this case study is to provide context and analysis about complexities of scaling social impact in South Asia. It does not intend to serve as endorsement or illustration of effective or ineffective organizational practices. The full series of cases can be found at innovation.brac.net.

In the early eighties a village near the Chinese border, Sost, wanted us to help them build a tunnel through the mountains. We told them it was impossible and would cost too much money. They raised money and dug half of it themselves—then came back to us and said, please come with us, see what we've done, we just need money to finish it—now will you help us? And we did. It was incredible how they completely transformed that whole area with crops and trees. People's capacities are way beyond what we think.

Inspired by the prevalence of poverty in Pakistan and the successes of community development programmes like the Comilla model, in 1982 Shoaib Sultan Khan began the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme in the northern regions of Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral. He was a fervent believer in participatory development. A former civil service officer with experience working in other development initiatives in South Asia that worked in pro-poor community mobilisation, Shoaib was convinced that, once organised and given sufficient skills and capacity, the poor were capable of improving their own lives.

The communities where Aga Khan Rural Support Programme worked needed funds, infrastructure development, skills training and capital. They developed programmes with communities to help meet these needs. Through active participation with communities in the region they created a mechanism for the poor to be involved in the planning and delivery of public services. Their approach was rooted in people's economic well-being. Once there was money, other needs could be addressed. As Shandana Khan, who was the CEO of the Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN) and had worked previously with the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme said, "We really focus on income increases—that's our priority. For example, with women's rights, we can talk of rights, but if they don't have any income, then they can't do anything else."

Ideas in brief

1   Seeding a network of small organisations with a shared model and vision avoids the challenges of managing a large organisation across diverse regions. This structure may also result in better understanding of local conditions and needs, as well as more capacity to adapt and respond to them.

2   Small organisations often lack the resources and influence to affect policy. When several institutions share a common mission, partnering with an independent intermediary organisation significantly strengthens advocacy efforts. In addition to creating a stronger voice and influence, the coordination and partnership may create new opportunities for learning, resource mobilisation, and networking.

3   Relationships matter immensely. Well-connected individuals can open doors and facilitate policy changes and funding opportunities. Across a network, it can be essential to have a few individuals who have strong social capital and use their relationships strategically.

4   A multi-dimensional approach to scale can facilitate and reinforce it on many levels. A holistic approach, considering local, national and regional levels amplifies the efforts and can be critical to affecting change.

After demonstrated success with contributing to the doubling of real incomes in the areas they worked, the provincial and federal governments as well as donors requested that they expand their operations to more districts of Pakistan. While the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme did not always have the intention of scaling up nationally, they always thought about scale within the communities that they worked. Shandana said, "It's not a representative model. It's not a project committee. It's a participatory model, with at least 75% of households participating in a typical locality. Sometimes with a man and a woman from each household participating."

Given the community-focused nature of the work, familiarity with the local context was of the utmost importance. If people couldn't speak the same language of development partnership and weren't familiar with the geographic and political context, it would be nearly impossible for them to effect change. At this point, a critical decision was made to not have the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme expand its operations to other parts of Pakistan but to instead set up new organisations for other local communities to work with. They were known as rural support programmes and were independent non-profit organisations.

Requests from provincial and then the federal government resulted in the establishment of new rural support programmes, with Aga Khan Rural Support Programme leadership and some of their staff assisting as mentors, leaders and trainers. They worked only in areas where they had been approached by individuals, or either the federal or provincial government.

Working with the government was a high priority. The rural support programmes strived to create a system that would increase the government's accountability and looked for ways to build upon their efforts. One strategy they used was raising awareness about government services and their rights as constituents. For example, they worked with a non-governmental education organisation,

Distribution of rural support programmes in Pakistan, 2010

Source: RSPN

Alif Ailaan, to help increase constituents' awareness about their rights to education. Significantly, key government programmes partnered with the rural support programmes to ensure service delivery at the grassroots level.

Rural support programmes not only collaborated with the government and increased accountability at the local level, but enabled communities to become accustomed to working collectively and contributing financially towards shared goals. Shandana shared the following example.

"In Punjab, in the northwest there was an initiative between the [United Kingdom's] Department for International Development and the government, where the goal was to increase enrollment in schools. However, students and teachers weren't attending school because the facilities were so bad. There were no toilets or boundary walls. The communities were willing to contribute funds to improve the schools because they were used to working in that system [because of the local support organisations]. I think this is a much more practical approach really. Demonstrating and making a lot of noise doesn't always solve things."

This represents the pragmatic approach that the rural support programmes took to solving problems at the local level—in their view protesting is not always the best approach, rather they have to work within the current system and develop local partnerships and solutions.

Formalising a national network

Initially, the staff of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme helped to establish rural support programmes in other provinces. Once rural support programmes were established, it provided assistance whenever it was requested. However by the late nineties, there were eight active rural support programmes in operation. The established ones, particularly the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, could not provide intensive support to all new programmes, and coordination across all of them required more work than any single programme could provide. Smaller rural support programmes, particularly those operating in remote areas, needed

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support to establish linkages with donors as well. Some leaders felt a need for a more coordinated approach to support the scale up of their movement across Pakistan.

In 1999 three individuals formed an informal group which they called the Rural Support Programme Resource Group. By 2000 this group had approached the Department for International Development (now UKaid), a longstanding supporter of the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, to support a network of rural support programmes. Shoaib invited hand-picked expertise from the National Rural Support Programme, Sarhad Rural Support Programme and Aga Khan Rural Support Programme to join him in setting up an umbrella network for the rural support programmes. The Rural Support Programmes Network was established in 2000 as an independent non-profit with Shandana as the CEO and Shoaib as Chairman. Shoaib was known as a visionary founder and leader, and he sat on the board of many of the programmes. His expertise went unquestioned and his advice inspired action. Shandana's experience working at three different rural support programmes was also a huge asset.

RSPN's staff and management were heavily influenced by rural support programmes. Their board of directors consisted of all programme CEOs and chairpersons (as ex-officio members) while the majority of RSPN staff was comprised of former programme employees. To engage external stakeholders in their work, RSPN also included development experts, corporate and former senior

government officials in their board of directors. By 2014, RSPN was a small team of around 30 core staff and employed other staff as needed on a contractual basis. Given the scope of their tasks, and the need to spend time in the rural areas, they were sometimes stretched thin.

What did RSPN do?

RSPN's core functions included policy advocacy, liaising with donors, fostering learning, coordinating and aligning strategy, and strategic quality assurance of rural support programme work. RSPN also fostered innovation by encouraging programmes to test new ideas. Essentially, it did things that the programmes wouldn't have the time or capacity to do themselves and things which RSPN piloted with selected rural support programmes, for replication on a larger scale by other programmes. It was necessary for the programmes to have a national level organisation, speaking with one voice on their behalf, whether it was to receive funds or advocate for favorable policy changes. It was also helpful to have RSPN scanning for opportunities to learn and improve.

RSPN did a lot to build capacity among the programmes. They shared best practices, and organised resource groups on specific strategic topic areas, such as conflict resolution, climate change, youth, gender and social mobilisation. This made it possible for the programmes to focus almost solely on implementation. RSPN's day-to-day activities were often determined by requests they received from programmes.

Though RSPN did have a small portfolio of pilots that they implemented in collaboration with programmes, its core functions essentially made them an intermediary organisation rather than an implementing one. RSPN also did a lot to impart a common vision that spanned across all programmes. This made programme staff realise that their work was part of a national initiative, rather than a donor initiative with short-term goals. This motivated them, and inspired a long-term approach. The rural support programmes required funding to support community infrastructure development and the establishment of skills training and other programmes. Ensuring their financial sustainability was imperative from the beginning. Four rural support programmes had public funds which they invested as endowments. They did this so they could continuously employ core staff, which enabled them to ensure institutional memory and technical expertise. Grassroots organising skills were hard

Growth of Rural Support Programmes' local support organisations, 2004 - 2014
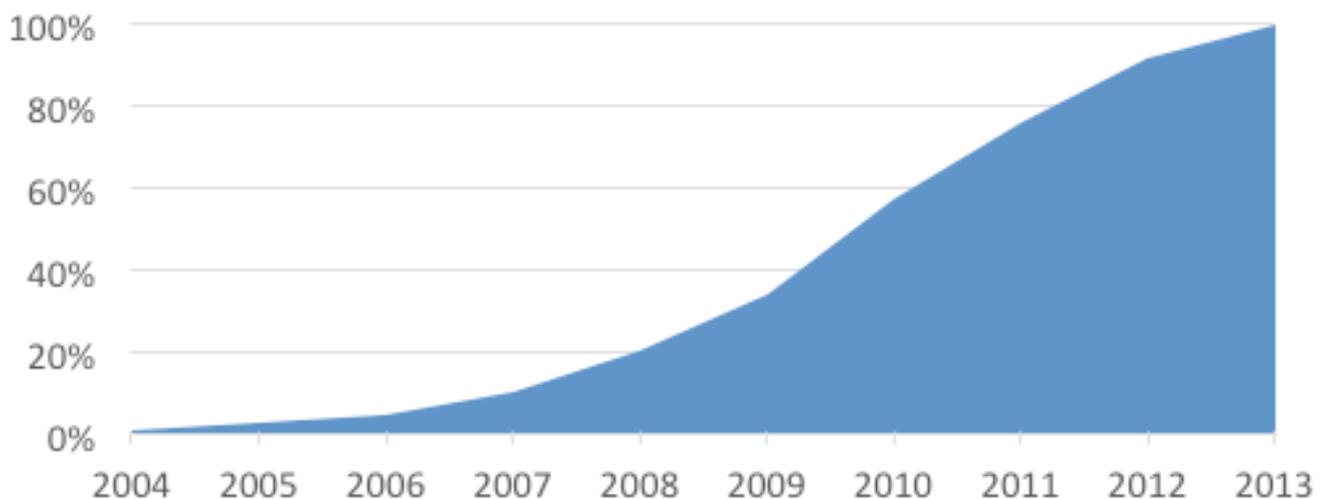
Note:
A local support organisation (LSO) is comprised of all community organisations in a district. In 2013, there were 841 LSOs in total.

Source: RSPN's Management Information System

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to come by, and they wanted staff who really understood the vision. The advantage of creating an endowment was to eliminate an ongoing reliance on the government for funding, as they assumed that a change in power would likely mean the end of public resources for their work. Community projects were funded through separate project funds from an assortment of donors. RSPN was fortunate to have donors like DFID, who had a wider strategic objective of influencing a Pakistan wide effort through its partnership with RSPN.

To sustain a core competency, in 2005 RSPN built a financial corpus to fund its core functions of support to the rural support programmes. This reserve fund was built according to a RSPN business plan, from project overheads, consultancies by its staff and through a large donation from the rural support programmes. RSPN existed to support the rural support programmes, who provided the bulk of its funding.

RSPN assisted the rural support programmes in core strategic tasks. One of the most important functions they played was maintaining and building relationships with important partners, especially the national government and international donors. As Shandana said, "One of the key aspects of social mobilization is how communities can make the government more accountable and how communities can partner with government to improve basic services. Some NGOs like to say they work outside of the government, to pressure it —but in South Asian countries you can't say that the state is responsible for everything. The state has a lot of constraints--unless there is a partnership approach, it won't work. After all, it is our state—we elected these people and must work with them."

These relationships often made all the difference, whether it was with helping to secure funding or

implementing a large scale policy change. RSPN staff, especially Shoaib, already had many such relationships, including contacts with a former prime minister. They also worked hard to proactively cultivate relationships before they needed a favor. Knowing when to leverage these relationships was an important and complex skill that they used effectively.

When the newly elected government of Nawaz Sharif came to power in Pakistan, there was a surge of activity within RSPN to meet with newly elected government officials in all provinces to secure their support and funding. They also met with Imran Khan, the opposition leader, and briefed him on their social mobilisation movement. In this way, they covered all the bases and got everyone's buy in.

It was often easier for international donors to interact with RSPN, since they were based in the capital, and could speak on behalf of the whole network. Donors sometimes preferred to issue grants to them, have them administer the funding, and assist programmes with the reporting.

RSPN increasingly became a platform for donors to support the rural support programmes. This was less complicated for them than issuing smaller grants, and they felt they could trust RSPN with the fund management. Additionally, when applying for funds, a joint request from multiple programmes carried more weight than individual organisations applying on their own, and it increased the likelihood of receiving funds. As a result of RSPN's relationships with donors, they were sometimes able to encourage donors to direct funds to high priority areas for the rural support programmes.

RSPN was the largest, local NGOs platform in Pakistan. It was easier for RSPN to advocate and encourage policy changes when they were representing millions of people across Pakistan. Shandana said, "Scale is a big reason we have been able to have a policy impact. Saying that you work in two villages is fundamentally different than if you say you are working with thirty-five million people." Recently, RSPN focused more energy on their communications strategy. It was also easier for the media and researchers to be able to interact with RSPN to get the information or contacts they need, rather than to collect information independently.

It was important to the rural support programmes that they learn from each other. RSPN acted as a convener, especially through its board as all rural support programmes were represented on it. RSPN often oversaw a lot of the knowledge sharing

activities across the network. As Muhammad Ali Azizi, RSPN's Social Mobilisation Specialist said, "Sometimes the rural support programmes connect one on one, but it's often through us." New ideas were likely to be received more positively if introduced by RSPN.

It encouraged all programmes to learn from other organisations as well. In 1995, the United Nations Development Programme established the South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme with the view of replicating the rural support programme model across South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries under Shoaib's leadership. The most successful replication was made by the Indian government in Andhra Pradesh, the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty, which ultimately impacted 12 million people. Over a decade later, RSPN brought the CEOs of all rural support programmes to India to see their work. They had made some different adaptations, but what really struck the visitors from Pakistan was the women's programme. Several returned home to start women-only programmes in some of their communities. They also learned a lot from India's approach to clustering the social mobilisation tiers, later adapting it into their programmes as well.

RSPN in 2014

Increasingly, external organisations included policy advocacy, liaising with donors, fostering learning, coordinating and aligning strategy, and strategic quality assurance of rural support programme work. RSPN also fostered innovation by encouraging programmes to test new ideas.

RSPN usually organised exposure trips and accompanied them on field visits. At the time this case was written, they had been working regionally with other organisations that were doing similar work, offering technical assistance in Afghanistan, Tajikstan and Myanmar. Many of the rural support programmes share a border with Afghanistan, and there are significant cross-border issues. Working with them could prove beneficial for the Pakistan based rural support programmes as well. RSPN was poised to become an important regional expert on development and community mobilisation.

Shandana reflected that they were perhaps spending too much time on project management for the rural support programmes, when they should be primarily operating as a strategic think tank. She felt that reinforcing the multi-tiered social mobilisation approach needed to remain the mainstay of the network's objective.

Source: Shandana Khan and Shoaib Sultan Khan visit a rural support programme

Reflections and closing thoughts

For the rural support programmes' expansion, a networked approach made the most sense. It was necessary because of the local nature of the work. It also prevented the creation of a massive, bureaucratic institution unable to cater to diverse local needs. Presumably, a localised management and administration also increased the sense of ownership. The division of the intermediation tasks enabled the programmes to focus more of their time and resources on implementation, coming together strategically at the national level, through RSPN. RSPN could then focus on important but less urgent tasks. These included maintaining relationships, securing funds, ensuring cross-learning, fostering innovation, dissemination, and attempting to effect change at the national level, and even influencing changes regionally and in other developing countries. Through Shoaib's role with the UN and RSPN's technical assistance, similar programmes have been developed internationally. Other organisations may consider a similar division of tasks, seeking partnerships where specific tasks can be outsourced or developing a network to manage certain strategic priorities. The importance of investing and maintaining relationships cannot be underestimated.

In the case of the rural support programmes, forming an umbrella organisation enabled them to stay connected to each other, remembering that they were part of a larger movement. It also made it easier to influence policy, because as Shandana pointed out, it is much easier to lobby for policy changes if you can speak on behalf of millions. Other organisations can learn from this, and consider building a network or partnering with similar groups, to increase the likelihood that their policy goals will be realised.

With the help of RSPN, the individual rural support programmes envisioned scale holistically—it was not just working with an entire community, or a region—but also thinking about impacting national policy, and that of neighbouring states. The multi-tiered scaling strategy at the local, national and international levels did a tremendous amount to reinforce and amplify their efforts. They were well positioned to affect policy making at the national, and sometimes even the international level, via initiatives like the South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme.

The RSPN example illustrates a unique way to facilitate scaling—through a networked approach and the formation of an umbrella group which can focus on strategic goals, such as capacity and relationship building.

References

Information for this case was collected over the course of a year as part of the "Doing while Learning" project. Methods included field visits, regular discussions, logbooks, and analysis of RSPN's existing management information system.

Interviews were conducted with the following individuals:

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