

Advocacy in Action: Scaling Social Mobilization in Pakistan

"I never had it that good as during Mr. Shaukat Aziz's tenure as Prime Minister. RSP's suddenly started becoming the centerpiece for poverty reduction programs. I would often take liberties with him and argue about the importance of social mobilization in poverty reduction... Finally, Social Mobilization received the biggest boost at his hands for which the two million rural poor households would remain ever indebted to him and so also the RSP Network and all its members." Shoaib Sultan Khan

As Shoaib Sultan Khan offered this toast at the farewell dinner in honor of his friend, former Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, he thought of the events that had led to that moment. It was the 14th of December 2007, two weeks after the signing of a major agreement with the Pakistani government that saw his nearly three decades of work with the Rural Support Programmes (RSPs) in Pakistan receive a major recognition and boost in funding.

Twenty five years before, in December 1982, Shoaib had moved to the mountainous region of Gilgit to set up the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP). By 2007, he had become the leader of a movement of more than 5,000 like-minded professionals working in RSPs all across Pakistan. The movement had empowered nearly two million rural households to take control of their own progress. The social mobilization approach Shoaib had developed and perfected over the years with the RSPs was by then a mainstream development policy of the government.

Champions within the government had provided crucial support for this accomplishment. Three years ago, Pervez Tahir, Chief Economist of the Planning Commission, and a strong advocate of the social mobilization movement, had created opportunities for umbrella Rural Support Program Network (RSPN) to integrate the social mobilization model into Pakistan's development framework agenda.

In his advocacy efforts, Shoaib had met with local and provincial governments, government ministries and commissions, the World Bank, the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund, and last, but not least, Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz on several occasions. In the end, the government granted a \$75 million funding boost to social mobilization to be implemented by local Rural Support Programmes. The long-term goal of seeing the social mobilization movement reach the national scale seemed more attainable, particularly as RSPN matured and developed.

Taking a seat after his comments, Shoaib contemplated what strategy could create opportunities to mobilize more funds for RSP expansion.

Rural Support Programmes: Pakistan's solution to rural poverty reduction

In the early 1980s, over a third of Pakistan's rural households lived in poverty. Many programs across South Asia were experimenting with community-based models for increasing livelihood and social development. In 1982, the Aga Khan Foundation launched Pakistan's first Rural Support Programme- the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) - to improve the lives and income of the rural poor in the

northern areas (now Gilgit-Baltistan) of Pakistan. Shoaib Sultan Khan, a former civil service officer with experience working in pro-poor community mobilization, was appointed the first General Manager of AKRSP. From his experience with other organizations working on development, Shoaib had come to realize that the poor were capable of improving their own lives if they are organized, and are given the skills and capacity to do so. In the mountainous Gilgit District in Northern Pakistan, AKRSP thus began organizing communities into village organizations to identify and address the specific needs of the communities. Through instruments such as community financing, community infrastructure development and skills training, AKRSP mobilized these grassroots organizations to encourage villagers' active participation in their own development process. These village organizations also gave the government and private sector organizations a mechanism to involve the poor in the planning and delivery of public services.

Over the next decade, AKRSP expanded to cover a population of approximately one million people across the northern areas and Chitral District of Pakistan's Khyber-Pukhtunkhwa (KP) province (earlier the North West Frontier Province). The World Bank's evaluations of AKRSP in 1986 and 1989 revealed that its social mobilization approach had contributed to the doubling of real incomes in the northern regions during this time. This led to widespread interest in implementing similar programs, and AKRSP was approached by several donors, as well as the provincial and federal governments, to expand its operations to other provinces of Pakistan.

This was a major turning point in the RSP movement. Instead of scaling-up its geographical reach, AKRSP decided that it would be more efficient to replicate its programs by providing support and training to set up new RSPs in other provinces. Given the geographical and ethnic diversity in Pakistan, the nature of challenges people faced were very different, as were the donors and stakeholders. The community-based approach of the RSP model meant that familiarity with local communities and governments, their languages and development challenges were extremely important. For these reasons, Pakistan would be better served by a network of new, small RSPs. Replication, instead of expansion, also avoided the challenges of managing a large organization across diverse regions.

Thus, when USAID and the provincial government of Khyber-Pukhtunkhwa approached Shoaib in 1989 to expand AKRSP operations in the KP region, he sent a team of senior AKRSP staff to provide initial support and training to set up a new RSP. The Sarhad Rural Support Program (SRSP) was established in 1989 as a result, and was eventually led by Forez Shah, who had worked with Shoaib in the government and later at AKRSP. In the following years, many AKRSP staff started their own RSPs, or in some cases, took leave from AKRSP to help others set up RSPs in another area. Shoaib contributed significantly to this process. Even today, he remains an active Board Member for a majority of the RSPs that have been established since then.

The replication approach quickly gained momentum, leading to the creation of seven new RSPs across Pakistan over the next decade (see **Exhibit A**). The largest, National Rural Support Programme (NRSP), funded primarily by a Rs. 500 million (\$20 million at the time) endowment from the federal and provincial government, was created at the behest of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in 1992. Three additional RSPs were established at the request of and with direct funds from provincial and the federal governments and were largely a result of strong advocacy by key individuals in the RSPs, primarily Shoaib himself. Government support was driven by the idea that RSPs, in their respective provinces, would assist and facilitate the government's development efforts by improving its service delivery functions and filling the gap where necessary. In turn, government funding and support contributed significantly to the rapid expansion and effective implementation of the RSP model across Pakistan.

The Social Mobilization Model

Over the years, the RSPs developed a core set of principles for social mobilization. They worked closely with the communities and villages to improve service delivery, both public and private, by establishing linkages between service providers and communities, and when necessary, engaging in providing services themselves. Eventually, this took the shape of organizing community members into three tiers: Community Organizations (COs), Village Organizations (VOs), and Local Support Organizations (LSOs)- that start at the neighborhood (COs) level and federate from village (VO) upwards to the Union Council (LSO) level (See **Exhibit B**). By effectively organizing the poor into forming active, self-sustaining social institutions, i.e. LSOs, the RSPs essentially found their own exit strategy out of these communities.

Organizing the RSP movement: Rural Support Programmes Network

By 1998, there were eight RSPs in operation. Increasingly, their leadership felt the need for a more organized and coordinated approach to scaling-up and supporting their ever-evolving functions and activities. Previously, new RSPs were set up with programmatic and management support from the experienced AKRSP staff. However with the increasing scale, AKRSP was no longer able to provide such intense support. It was also very difficult for RSPs operating in remote provinces, such as the Balochistan Rural Support Programme, to establish and maintain linkages with donors to secure funding for their program. Many RSPs voiced a desire to establish a central coordinating body to support the RSP movement more systematically.

Shoaib approached Shandana Humayun Khan from Sarhad Rural Support Programme to set up an umbrella network that would serve as a central coordinating body for all RSP activities. She quickly agreed, and moved to Islamabad to work with him on establishing it. Shoaib (Chairman) and Shandana (CEO) received financial support from DFID and registered the Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN) as an independent non-profit organization in 2000.

RSPN's key roles were to provide capacity building, policy advocacy, fund-raising, resource mobilization and knowledge-sharing support to the RSPs. Its board comprised all RSP heads, development experts, corporate and senior ex-government officials.

An opportunity to influence policy

RSPs and individuals like Shoaib had traditionally maintained strong relations with the government, both for functional and financial reasons. It was evident from the government's willingness to support new provincial RSPs that it viewed the social mobilization model as an effective strategy for rural development. However, given the political instability in Pakistan, government funding had often been intermittent and unreliable. A major hurdle RSPs faced when planning for a country-wide expansion of their reach was securing a large and stable source of funding that would support their scale-up activities. Limited funds for RSPs also meant limited funds for RSPN itself. Urgently, RSPN needed to secure a steady stream of funding for the RSPs. It needed to influence national policy and create even stronger ties with the government.

An opportunity to do this presented itself in 2004, when Shoaib was invited by the Deputy Chairman and Secretary of the Planning Commission and the Chief Economist to chair a high-level working group on rural development and devolution, which was to provide input for the government's Mid-Term Development Framework (MTDF) for the period 2005-2010. The development framework would have implications for allocation of government funding, also creating space for resources to expand RSP activity.

RSPN had previously been involved in another consultation for the Pakistan Poverty Reduction Strategy that involved dialogues with 121 community organizations in 49 districts. The consultation identified the ineffective implementation of the government's service delivery mechanism, and not lack of resources, as the reason behind the poverty gap persisting in Pakistan. At the very first working group meeting, Shoaib showed the group a video RSPN had prepared featuring the consultation's findings. "The video had a salutary effect on the members of the working group, and really set the tone for the rest of the consultation process," he remarked.

Building on this, RSPN, in collaboration with the RSPs, arranged field visits for the Planning Commission members to familiarize them with the social mobilization model and the impact RSPs have had in organizing rural communities and improving service delivery mechanisms.

Under Shoaib's guidance, the working group quickly developed a consensus report for inclusion in the MTDF. The group suggested increased social mobilization and community empowerment to strengthen civil society institutions of the poor and government outreach, and encouraged participation of the poor in demanding the services they need most. This would also disburse public resources more efficiently to ensure effective poverty reduction.

The Working Group thus recommended a country-wide social mobilization process where the government and RSPs would work together to mobilize 7.05 million rural households between 2005 and 2010. If approved, this social mobilization project would double the reach of the RSPs in a short period of five years. The Deputy Chairman of the Planning Commission, Akram Sheikh, who spearheaded this effort internally, expressed his appreciation to the group for its efforts, and incorporated the group report into the MTDF draft.

Planning government policy

Given the strong recommendations from the working group, Shoaib was shocked when the final MTDF document was released without the chapter containing its report. A crestfallen Shoaib reached out to Chief Economist Pervez Tahir to convey his concerns. At Pervez's advice, he notified Akram of the situation and arranged a meeting to resolve the issue. The meeting eventually led to the release of a supplement to the original MTDF titled "Poverty Reduction through Social Mobilization" in September 2005 that included the recommendations of the working group report.

Pervez, a strong supporter of Shoaib and RSPN, went out of his way to pursue the project's implementation. In December 2005, he presented a concept paper for the Social Mobilization project on the report to the approving body of government for a large federal development project. By February 2006, Pervez had successfully persuaded the Deputy Chairman and Secretary of Planning Division to start a consultative process to develop a formal government proposal for the project.

Provincial governments welcomed social mobilization as a strategy for poverty reduction. Over the next few months, RSPN organized field visits and stakeholder meetings for the consultation group. Planning Division members, often accompanied by the Deputy Chairman and Secretary, and Pervez took a few weeks to visit all the provinces, where they met with the provincial governments and the RSPs. Shoaib and Shandana always attended these meetings with the individual RSP CEOs, where RSP heads made formal presentations and talked about proposed expansion plans. Following the meetings and visits, the group came up with a proposal for community mobilization in 5,375 Rural Union Councils to be carried by the RSPs by 2010. The project, to be financed by the federal government, would be implemented through public-private partnership between provincial RSPs and governments. To further the project planning process, RSPs and RSPN worked closely with the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development and provincial governments to develop their respective strategy plans for implementation.

At the first stage of review, it was recommended that the proposal be split into two phases, with the first phase covering 2000 Union Councils, and the rest being covered in the second phase starting in 2008. Pervez, once again, showed great initiative and submitted a revised proposal in May 2006 for approval. The project was then recommended to the Executive Committee of National Economic Council and approval was requested for Rs 9,800 million (\$163 million at the time) for implementation.

RSPN's goal of securing funds for expansion of the social mobilization model was very close to its realization. The scope and scale of the RSP movement would nearly double as a result of this project. It would lead to a significant injection of funds into RSPs, both for expansion of existing RSPs and for creation of new ones where necessary. RSPN, too, would see an increase in funds due to its major coordinating role in the whole process- it would review RSPs' work plans and monitoring reports and sit in both the Federal and the Provincial Steering Committees for the project. The design of the project at this stage was to mobilize community groups through which government programs would deliver services. Later on, when the proposal was re-routed to the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund, the model became more of a self-contained, non-governmental initiative.

From policy to implementation: Crossing bureaucratic hurdles

With the project submitted, there was little for RSPN to do but wait for the proposal to make its way through the bureaucratic channels of the government for approval. This, however, turned out to be more complicated than expected. Personnel changes in the higher ranks of the Planning Division, including the Secretary himself, led to internal disagreements regarding the future of the project and significantly stalled its progress. To make matters worse, Chief Economist Pervez, who was the strongest advocate for the social mobilization project within the government, was also transferred at this time.

In October 2006, things took a turn for the better when the World Bank country director John Wall approached the Deputy Chairman and the Secretary of the Planning Division to offer funding from the Bank for the whole project. John was familiar with the work of the RSPs in Pakistan as the Bank was one of their major donors. While the policy advocacy for social mobilization with the government was in motion, RSPN had simultaneously kept the World Bank informed of their progress with the Mid-Term Development Framework as well.

Changing from the federal to World Bank funding mode would mean that funds for RSPs, instead of coming directly from the government through RSPN, would go through non-government channels and be disbursed through a competitive bidding process. The Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF),

which conventionally served as the World Bank's vehicle for funding disbursement, was going to host the funds and open up bidding to interested parties. Financially, this cut RSPN out of the project. It also meant that some of the funding could go to other PPAF partner NGOs. However, given PPAF's past support of the RSPs, RSPN did not deter from its advocacy work.

In order for the World Bank to fund the project, the government had to first make an official request. To do this, the local government proposals needed to pass through Pakistan's Executive Committee of the National Economic Council and then to the Economic Affairs Division (EAD), which would officially write to the World Bank. Once again, a strong champion was required to encourage government officials to prioritize this initiative. Shoaib reached out to the Deputy Chairman and Secretary of the Planning Division to process the proposal and urged the Secretary, Malik Akram, to send the requisite consent letter to the Ministry of Finance. To ensure that the letter was sent, he used every opportunity and connections he had to push the agenda forth. In addition to soliciting support for the project from key people in the government, including the Secretary General of Finance and the Secretary of the Economic Affairs Division, he also requested a former batch mate, who knew Malik well, to intercede on his behalf. Malik promised to send the consent letter, and even though he left the Planning Division for another position soon after, he kept his promise and sent the letter to the Ministry of Finance the day he handed over charge to his successor.

Shoaib knew that in order for the project to go through, he would need key people on board to keep the process moving along. His reputation, years of experience in the civil service and the integral role he played in the RSP movement gave him credibility, and with it, an audience at the highest of levels, including the Prime Minister. He managed to meet with Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz to convey his concerns regarding the project's future and to request him to advance and expedite the coordination between the Ministry of Finance and the Planning Division regarding this project. A week later, when he met the Prime Minister again at a dinner, he used the opportunity to remind him of the request. "I said that seeing the policy implemented would be my dream come true," recalled Shoaib, when later describing his conversation.

It was obvious from Shoaib's persistence and passion that he truly believed the social mobilization model to be the most effective solution for rural poverty alleviation. The Prime Minister, too, greatly valued his opinion. Having visited Shoaib's social mobilization projects back when he was the Finance Minister, he had faith in the work the RSPs were doing under his leadership. For example, when a livestock project to be implemented by the RSPs was being opposed by members of the Executive Committee of National Economic Council, the Prime Minister, on learning that it was Shoaib's project, approved it anyway.

Working behind the scenes

"At the end of the day policy advocacy is much more than working groups and dialogues. To see your policy translate into action, there are hurdles you need to cross, and that is where the real work happens. At the end of the day, what really matters is who your champions are in the government. Identifying the people who believe in your cause and are willing to help you move it along is the most critical part of the process." Shandana H. Khan, Rural Support Programmes Network

As the proposal was stalled by more bureaucratic delays, Shoaib approached Deputy Chairman Akram to move things forward. Akram resolved the problem by recalling the Division's earlier decision to the Ministry of Finance, and directing them to forward it to the Prime Minister's Secretariat immediately.

Miscommunications caused significant delays. At one point during the process, the Ministry of Finance was planning to channel the Bank's Social Mobilization project funds through the fledgling Khushhal Pakistan Fund instead of the much larger PPAF. On learning this, Shoaib and John tried to intercede with the Ministry to try and revert them back to the original plan. It turned out that one of the higher officials in the Ministry felt that the PPAF was already overloaded and operating beyond capacity, and hence the funds should go through a less burdened channel. John met with the official and encouraged him to channel the Social Mobilization funds through PPAF and simultaneously apply for funds for Khushhal Pakistan Fund. To his surprise, however, the Ministry of Finance's summary to the Prime Minister stated that John had supported the decision to select Khushhal Pakistan Fund as the Bank's funding channel- a clear misunderstanding given the content of their conversation.

Once again, Shoaib went about trying to rectify the situation, this time engaging directly with the Prime Minister to advocate for PPAF. In December 2006, he shared with the Prime Minister the original document containing the Planning Division's views on the summary that Akram had shared with him, and a report praising PPAF's role in supporting RSPs in the post-earthquake rehabilitation efforts in Khyber-Pukhtunkhwa. By the end of the meeting, the Prime Minister agreed to make half the amount of the Social Mobilization project available through the Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund. His decision was conveyed by his principal secretary to the Economic Affairs Division within 12 hours.

In January 2007, almost a month after the Prime Minister's decision had reached the EAD, it sent a letter to the World Bank requesting \$120 million for the project. However, uncertainty arising from the shortage of soft funds at the Bank's International Development Association pushed back the loan approval by almost a year. At the end, Shoaib once again apprised the Prime Minister of the delay, and urged him to consent the use of hard and soft funds for the project. Finally, in December 2007, an agreement was signed between the Government of Pakistan and the World Bank for the Social Mobilization project. A subsidiary loan agreement was signed between the Ministry of Finance and the PPAF soon after, officially setting the Social Mobilization project in motion.

Spreading the movement: The path ahead

Three years after the commencement of the policy advocacy process, Shoaib and RSPN's efforts were rewarded with a public announcement from the government regarding the provision of funds for the Social Mobilization project. A total of \$75 million from the World Bank was allocated to the nationwide project titled "Participatory Development through Social Mobilization" for the first three-year phase of the project, starting in July 2008. The funds also went into several RSPs and led to an increase their reach to an additional 1.1 million households in 20 new districts over the next three years. By the end of the project in 2011, the combined reach of the RSPs included a total of 4.6 million households across 110 out of 131 districts and 2 out of the 13 Federally Administrated Tribal Provinces in Pakistan.

The involvement of PPAF had left RSPN completely out of the financial loop for the project. The DFID funding RSPN had received upon commencement was to run out by 2011, so RSPN needed to secure funds for its own survival as well. Shoaib saw great value in RSPN's contributions to the RSP movement. In addition to its initial capacity building, policy advocacy, fund-raising and knowledge-sharing functions,

RSPN's role over the years had evolved to include coordination of key inter-RSP strategic resource groups, such as the Gender Resource Group and the Social Mobilization Resource Team, which developed strategies and shared lessons across the RSPs. But given the limited role of RSPN in the implementation of the Participatory Development for Social Mobilization project, RSPs did not deem it necessary for RSPN to receive any financial support from the project funds. Shandana and Shoaib argued that without RSPN's initial advocacy at the working group, the project would not have come into existence. The RSPs at last agreed to jointly contribute to a \$1 million endowment fund for RSPN, which was to contribute towards RSPN's future sustainability.

RSPN's mission to see the RSP movement expand across all regions and districts of Pakistan, however, was still far from completion. The inevitable changes in the government meant new leaders, new policies, and with it- another policy advocacy process to secure new funding for the RSP movement. What should RSPN's strategy be to scale up the movement to the next level?

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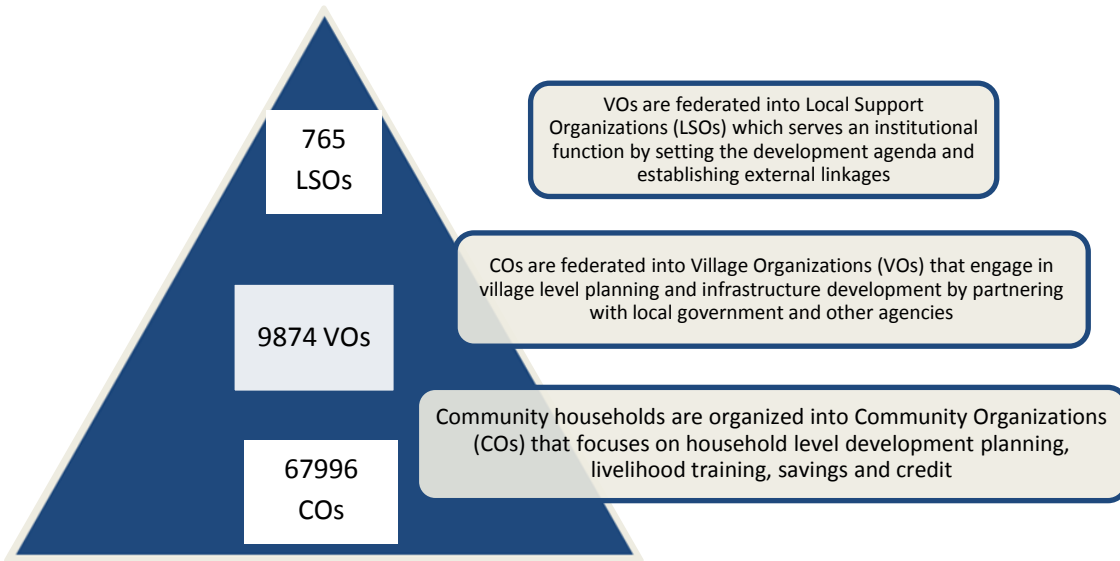
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Exhibit A: Rural Support Programmes Movement

Name of RSP	Year	Region	Funding organizations
Aga Khan Rural Support Programme	1982	Northern Pakistan	The Aga Khan Foundation, Department for International Development (DFID), Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation, Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), TROCAIRE (Ireland) and RSPN
Sarhad Rural Support Programme	1989	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Government of Pakistan (MINFAL), Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF), Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), SDC, USAID, Department for International Development (DFID), Learning for Life and IDRF (Canada)
National Rural Support Programme	1992	All provinces and Azad Jammu & Kashmir	Federal and Provincial Governments, Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF), International Labour Organization (ILO) and Oxfam Novib
Institute of Rural Management	1993	Islamabad and All provinces	Durawa Development Organization (DDO), ILO, Department for International Development (DFID), FATA Development Authority, Government of Sindh, Punjab Skill Development Fund and UNICEF.
Ghazi Barotha Taraqiati Idara	1995	Swabi, Haripur and Attock districts	Government of Pakistan (MINFAL), Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF), Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and RSPN
Thardeep Rural Support Programme	1997	Tharparkar	P&D Government of Sindh, the Netherlands Organization for International Development Cooperation (NOVIB), Save the Children UK, WFP, Oxfam International, UNICEF, the Hisar Foundation, the Sindh RSPs Consortium Karachi, Health and Nutrition Society HANDS, United Way Worldwide, LRBT, Ministry of Women Development, Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Livestock and the Forest Department of the Government of Sindh
Punjab Rural Support Programme	1998	Punjab	Government of Punjab, Federal Government, Asian Development Bank (ADB), FAO, International Labour Organization (ILO), Plan International, Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF), USAID, UNICEF and RSPN
Balochistan Rural Support Programme	2001	Balochistan	Government of Pakistan (MINFAL), Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF), UNICEF, FAO, WFP, WHO, Department for International Development (DFID) and RSPN
Sindh Graduates Association	2002	Sindh	Government of Pakistan, ActionAid, Aga Khan University (technical support provider)
Sindh Rural Support Organization	2003	Upper Sindh	Government of Pakistan (MINFAL), Government of Sindh, WWF, Pakistan Poverty Alleviation Fund (PPAF) and RSPN
Foundation for Integrated Development Action	2004	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and FATA	WWF, UNDP, USAID, UNFPA, UNHCR, UNICEF, OXFAM GB and Australian Direct Aid Program
Azad Jammu & Kashmir Rural Support Programme	2007	Azad, Jammu and Kashmir	Government of AJK, The Federal Government, World Food Programme (WFP), Department for International Development (DFID), International Fund for Agricultural Development

Exhibit B The three-tier social mobilization model



Source: RSPN, 2012

Exhibit C Map of RSP expansion

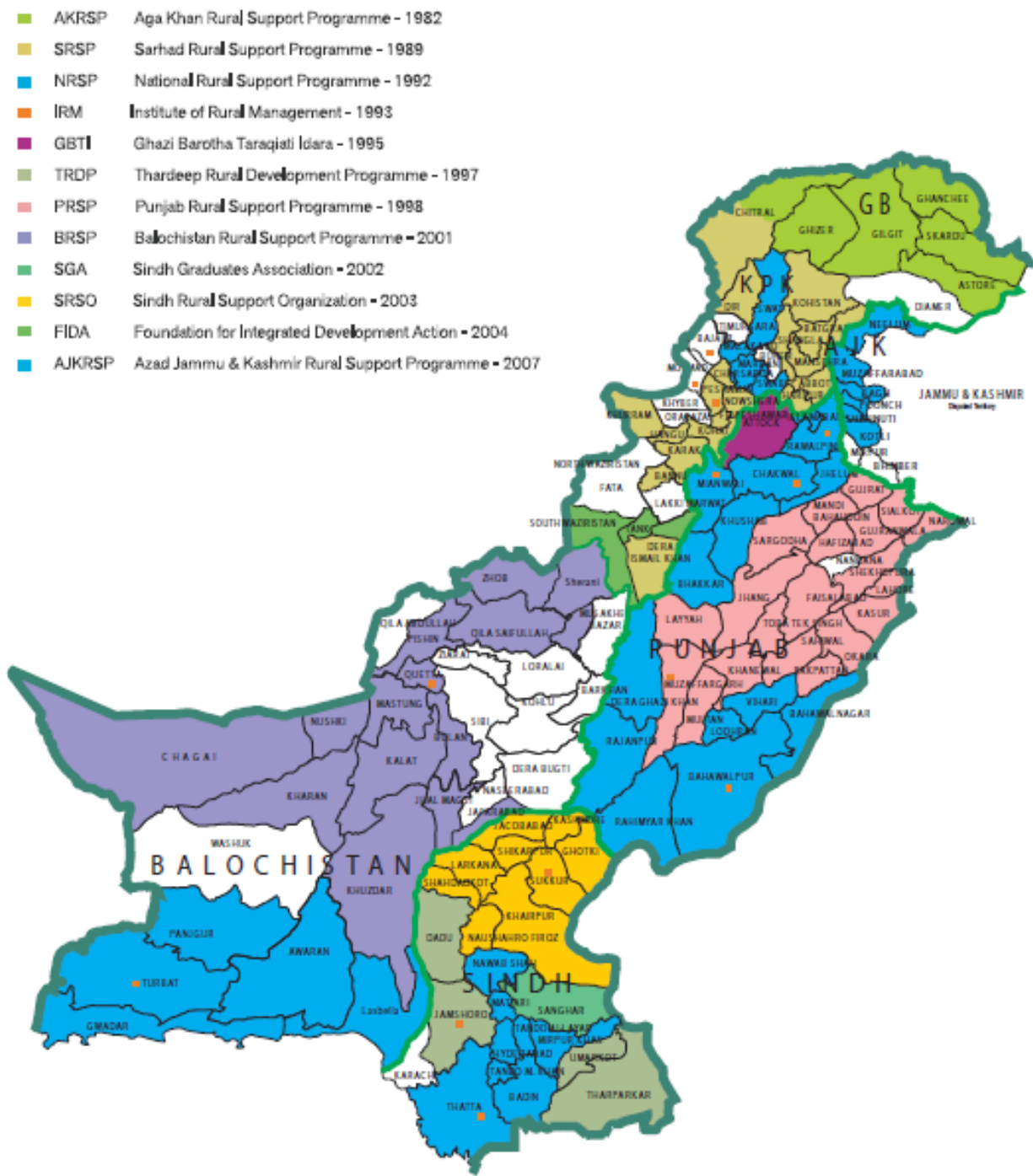


Exhibit D Percentage of districts covered by RSPs (1992-2012)

