

## Introduction

### SAP-PK's stated Value System

It was a secular organisation.

It believed in democracy.

It believed in social justice.

It believed in gender equality.

And, it believed in affirmative discrimination for women.

Although the military dictator had died the year before and a political set up was in place, Pakistan had a bad case of hangover from the eleven year-long dictatorship binge. Political parties were under great pressure, Section 144 prohibiting the assembly of more than four persons was still in force, and there was virtually no free political activity. This was time when civil society activists saw the immense need of initiating political discourse among the people.

That was one thing. However, as an organisation focussing on participatory development, South Asia Partnership-Pakistan was the more concerned with the existing concepts in the field. There was no dearth of this *anjuman* (association) or that working for the *behood* (welfare) of, say, daily wage earners or women or orphans. Their mode of operations was to collect funds from their own subscriptions and give out doles to needy persons. With no other model to follow, these groups were organized on the same lines as the country's political parties. Each had its president, secretary, finance secretary etc.

Despite their well-meaning endeavours, these associations, some of which had been in existence for four decades, had made any meaningful contribution to society. Nor had they brought about any sustainable change. The main reason was that these groups did not recognize the essential difference between charity and development initiatives.

When SAP-Canada began its consultation meetings in Pakistan with civil society activists, they found much common ground with them. Issues such as rampant population growth, unchecked defence expenditures, the imperative of Pakistan-India peace for development etc. came under discussion. In 1989, SAP-PK was launched with the motto: The Struggle to Empower People.

SAP-PK initiated its work with the following two-pronged understanding that development was:

- A process of enabling people by engaging them in participatory initiatives.
- Helping them realize their full human potential.

In SAP-PK's vocabulary, the meaning of 'full human potential' is not restricted only to economic development. It has a more holistic significance of livelihood related well-being coupled with social and political betterment. From this flows the struggle for rights-based concessions, especially for minorities, women and other under-privileged and marginalised sections of society. This latter is the second most important component of our philosophy.

SAP-PK thus began as a support organization for rural community projects with funding from CIDA and a number of other donor agencies. This was like beginning at step two without having taken the first step, that is, of preparing the beneficiary community or group for the task expected. Though some of SAP-PK's partners had been working in their respective communities for several years (in some cases for decades), as noted above the concepts of participatory development were yet alien to them. It was quite common in the beginning to hear of a CBO receiving funds for a specific project but ending up employing them in non-developmental exercises. While sincerity of purpose and integrity were never questionable, understanding of the principles of participatory development was certainly missing.

It was therefore very clear that individuals running community-based organisations were not yet ready to start receiving financial aid. SAP-PK recognised that mere good intentions on the part of the managers in beneficiary communities were not going to suffice, that the greater imperative was the building of their capacity. This then was the origin of the Resource Development Program. Everything else that SAP-PK eventually achieved flowed from it.

#### RDP Begins: 1991

The first action by SAP-PK was that it halted doling out funds to its partners. Instead, the staff went into overdrive developing the curriculum for the RDP training. The first level of this training was conceptual to define the concepts of welfare and charity on the one side and participatory development on the other. Another essential part at this level of discourse was a notion hitherto not acknowledged in the rural setting: gender and development. The history of matriarchy and patriarchy were discussed together with taboos and associated problems these antiquated ideas imposed on communities.

Organisational management featured prominently in the RDP trainings. But if a group was to run efficiently and manage its funds well, an understanding of financial management was essential. Emphasis was given to the structures of existing welfare groups that copied political parties. It was underlined that the quality of work delivered was in no way related to the high-sounding designations of the CBO. Sectoral and thematic training came next. Training did not follow a very hard and fast rule. With the passage to time, new discussions cropped up leading to the introduction of new topics.

There were in all six training sessions each year with a month between two sessions. One of the first exercises that trainee partners did in their respective villages was carrying out a base line survey. This tool helped streamline their working in the future. In this one month, SAP-PK teams did follow up visits to monitor how the training was internalised and put to use in different milieus.

Thirty different organizations were selected from each province for the RDP training. At a given time, organisations from two provinces would be undergoing training, that is, sixty organizations per year. At the culmination of the yearlong training, a joint session

was held. Time showed that this practice was extremely helpful in forging long-term, long-distances linkages that work to this day.

### Women to the Fore: 1995

One of the essential conditions for RDP training was that each organisation must send one male and one female staff member. However, many groups were strictly all-men shows, particularly those in rural areas and thus unable to field a woman participant. With time, the situation changed, but the realisation was not slow in coming that women were oppressed and sidelined. With UNESCO support, SAP-PK started an experimental Democratization for Women (DFW) program. The year was 1995.

Initiated in village Rohras of Sialkot district, this program had three objectives:

To increase women's participation in the political process.

To raise the number of women's organisations.

To empower women so that their voice is heard at a greater level.

Today, Bedari, the Rohras women's group, shines as proof that the three objectives were met. However, the going was not easy in the beginning. With names like Dr Rubina Saigol and Hina Jilani on the training roster, the girls who had signed up for the session had difficulties with their families. Indeed, even as the session began after some delay, a large crowd of local men gathered outside the training hall.

The village mullah was eventually sent in to present the objections the men had to this business: their young women with impressionable minds were being turned away from religion. The man was invited to sit in and listen before forming an opinion. He sat through to the end and as the first session began the following day, he brought his own daughter and daughter in law to join the training. The Rohras mosque may well have been the first in the country whose Friday sermon supported the work of an NGO and the women of the local community.

### Strengthening Democratic Governance in Pakistan and other Initiatives: 1998

By 1998, SAP-PK was no longer a donor or support organisation. Instead, it was now an implementing agency. This was also the time when it was realised that SAP-PK needs move on from RDP to Action Research and Training. SAP-ART was to be an institute that would move RDP graduates intellectually forward from where they stood subsequent to RDP. For various reasons SAP-ART is still waiting to get underway, however. RDP training continued until 2004, however.

Meanwhile, because of its interaction with rural partners, SAP-PK was discovering other sectors that needed attention. A vast majority of the country's population comprises of farmers who yet continue to be voiceless. Farmers' Development Program, launched in 2004 was designed to address farmers' problems. Together with some specialised trainings, the program also included provision of agricultural inputs to small farmers at

competitive rates. The real purpose of this exercise was to organise farmers in cooperative platforms, however. These function to this day as Kissan Baithaks.

Also in 2004, SAP-PK launched two new initiatives. The yearlong Democratic Human Rights Program to encourage and enhance citizens' participation of common citizens in the electoral process. Its focus was on women, rural people, and minorities, most of who were not registered in the voters' lists. The other program, Democratic Rights and Citizens' Education Program lasted for two years. Both programs were struggles for citizens' rights. The translation of the Social Charter into Urdu as well as the establishment of People's Assemblies was two significant undertakings in these programs.

Meeting just before the SAARC summits, the People's Assemblies presented the minutes of their proceedings in the summits. The voice of the common people, their aspirations and wishes were thus broadcast to the this South Asian forum. SAP-PK was thus able to take the voice of the people of Pakistan to the South Asian level. As for itself, the organization became known for speaking not just for Pakistan but also for the entire South Asian region.

Activity was meanwhile underway to launch Strengthening Democratic Governance in Pakistan. This mega-project was launched in forty districts of the country, ten each from the provinces. The aim of this initiative was to interface common people with local government leaders so that local government resources meant for the grassroots should actually be utilised where they were meant. As well as that, in tandem with its partners, SAP-PK raised people's units like District Focal Groups, District Resource Centres, Peasant Workers, and Women's groups.

Today, even as the local government system stands almost dismantled, there are innumerable cases of the effectiveness of these groups wherever they functioned in the entire country. A case that is the epitome of success as far as the working of PWGs is concerned comes from south Punjab.

#### Wresting their Right

South Punjab is cotton country where picking is traditionally done by women. During research in recent years SAP-PK learned that picking rate was pitifully low, sometimes being as little as two rupees per kilogram. Now, the average woman picks about twenty kilograms in a day and therefore earns no more than forty rupees for eight hours of back breaking work in intense heat.

The members of a women's group formed by SAP-PK in a village outside Layyah in the cotton belt was not happy with this meagre rate. Resolving that they were not going to settle for any less than seven rupees per kilogram, they made their decision known to the landlords when picking time arrived. After some resistance, the landowners had to settle for the demanded rate because either than or their cotton would have rotted on the stalk.

Taking the cue from these women, cotton pickers in neighbouring districts demanded and got higher wages. Today the rate is as high as Rs 400 per 40 kg of picked produce.

Yet another anti-women practice that prevails is of paying women half as much as men for the same amount of work. This is the norm for farm and industrial workers. Even as this document goes into print, SAP-PK is launching its campaign to bring payments for both genders at par. Beginning with forty districts countrywide, the program will eventually be expanded.

### Keeping to it

In 1989, SAP-PK started out with a certain program direction. It has remained steadfast and focussed over the years. There has been no deviation. However, this does not mean that we have stagnated; we have developed and enlarged. We still stand for participatory development, rights-based advocacy, women's participation in all sectors of life and that long-term change will only be possible when common people unite.

The programs running today, whatever they may be, all derive from the learnings of RDP as well as its various ramifications. SAP-PK recognises that consistency of action is the key to long-term development and continues to abide by the principles it set for itself in the beginning.