A rural support programme exit strategy: women filling vacated spaces and excelling in community development

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A rural support programme exit strategy: women filling vacated spaces and excelling in community development

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Rural support programmes in Pakistan are major players in rural development, with significant outreach. Owing to funding constraints, they are currently exploring an exit strategy whereby they facilitate the formation of multi-tier local support organisations (LSOs), including those exclusively run by women. The present article focuses on the impact of this exit strategy on rural women. The findings, based on survey research, show that women have fared well, been more effective in running the LSOs than men and, despite confronting a conservative culture, have effectively filled in spaces vacated by men.

Une stratégie de sortie pour un programme de soutien en milieu rural: lorsque des femmes remplissent les places libérées et excellent en développement communautaire
Les programmes de soutien en milieu rural menés au Pakistan constituent des éléments impor-tants dans le développement rural et ont un rayon d'influence considérable. Du fait des contra-intes de financement, ils explorent actuellement une stratégie de sortie dans le cadre de laquelle ils facilitent la formation d'organisations de soutien locales à plusieurs niveaux (OSL), dont certaines dirigées exclusivement par des femmes. Cet article traite principalement de l'impact de cette stratégie de sortie sur les femmes rurales. Les conclusions, basées sur des recherches menées par le biais de questionnaires, montrent que les femmes s'en sont bien sorties, qu'elles ont été plus efficaces que les hommes dans leur administration des OSL et que, bien qu'ayant affaire à une culture conservatrice, elles ont rempli les places libérées par les hommes de façon efficace.

Uma estratégia de saída do programa de apoio rural: mulheres preenchendo espaços vagos e destacando-se no desenvolvimento da comunidade
Programas de apoio rural no Paquistão são grandes parceiros no desenvolvimento rural, com significativo alcance. Devido às limitações de fundos, eles estão atualmente explorando uma estratégia de saída para promoverem a formação de organizações de apoio local (LSOs) em vários níveis, incluindo aquelas exclusivamente administradas por mulheres. Este artigo concentra-se no impacto desta estratégia de saída sobre as mulheres rurais. Os resultados, baseados em pesquisa de campo, mostram que as mulheres têm tido uma boa atuação, têm

sido mais efetivas na administração de LSOs do que os homens e, apesar de enfrentarem uma cultura conservadora, têm efetivamente preenchido espaços vagos de homens.

Una estrategia de salida para un programa de apoyo rural: mujeres que ocupan vacantes y sobresalen en el desarrollo comunitario
Los programas de apoyo rural en Pakistán tienen una presencia importante y un alcance significativo en el desarrollo rural. Debido a restricciones de financiación, actualmente estos programas adoptan una estrategia de salida que facilita la creación de organizaciones de apoyo local (OAL) de muchos niveles, incluyendo OAL cuyas integrantes son sólo mujeres. Este ensayo se centra en las repercusiones de esta estrategia de salida en las mujeres del campo. Los resultados obtenidos en una investigación basada en encuestas muestran que las mujeres han obtenido buenos resultados dado que las OAL a cargo de mujeres han respondido mejor que las de los hombres y, a pesar de la cultura conservadora que prevalece, las mujeres han cubierto los espacios dejados por los hombres de una manera eficaz.

Introduction

Government- and donor-supported rural support programmes (RSPs) engage in participatory rural development in Pakistan (Khan *et al.* 2007; Khan 2009). Via social mobilisation, they form community organisations at the grassroots level, which subsequently become partners in the development process.[1] The 10 members of the UK DFID-funded Rural Support Program Network (RSPN; founded in 1991) collectively operate in 93 of Pakistan's 137 districts and have a total membership of 4.15 million.[2] However, as they extend their activities across Pakistan, they face capacity and financial constraints. The latter is an ever-present risk and, despite the RSPs' results-based credibility, donor funding is uncertain.[3]

In response to such constraints, the RSPs have begun to steer their grassroots initiatives towards institutional sustainability with support from the RSPN. This entails forming apex local support organisations (LSOs) at the union council levels. Union councils are the lowest administrative tier; above them are *tehsils* (sub-districts), districts, and provinces. The aim is twofold. First, as apex organisations, the LSOs replicate the work of the RSPs, mobilising the communities, creating community organisations, and ensuring their participation in social, development, welfare and credit activities. The vertical structure is designed to ensure that the apex organisations form effective horizontal linkages with the government, NGOs, donors, and the private sector. Second, LSOs go beyond merely substituting for the RSPs; they represent an indigenisation of the social mobilisation process, ensuring a permanent support system which is locally owned, self-reliant, and capable of formulating context-specific development programmes (Aziz 2006; Mehr 2007; Khan 2008; RSPN 2009. Thus, the LSOs represent both a consolidation of participatory development and an exit strategy, enabling RSPs to focus on other communities more in need of their assistance. The objective is to have organisations *of* the people rather than organisations *for* the people at the grassroots level.

The present article explores how women have fared as a result of this exit strategy. As some of the LSOs were exclusively run by women, we compare their performance with LSOs run by men. Our major findings are that women have been more effective in running the LSOs and they have effectively filled spaces vacated by men seeking other opportunities as bread winners.

The article explains the history and structure of the LSO, the conceptual framework of social capital that underpins this community development, our research design and method, and findings. The Findings section reviews the impact of the exit strategy on women, indicates how they have filled spaces vacated by men and compares the performance of women LSOs with those run by men.

LSO history, structure, and governance

The LSO model was first envisioned in the 1980s by development practitioners from the Aga Khan Rural Support Program (AKRSP) (Azizi 2006).[4] They advocated the formation of village organisation (VO) clusters to sustain social mobilisation efforts and implement larger infrastructure projects.[5] The clusters were also meant to facilitate linkages with external agencies, create a new generation of social organisers, and provide a mechanism to address development challenges on a larger geographic scale, eventually transforming the role of the AKRSP to one of capacity-building (Khan and Khan 1992). AKRSP records show that a number of cluster organisations are still functional around the management of micro hydel projects that require continuous maintenance and management.

Since the original cluster organisations, the RSP institutional development approach has evolved through several iterations. In the late 1990s, RSPs started to shape these clusters into local development organisations (LDOs). The LDO model, too, was conceived as a broad-based, multi-purpose organisation that could articulate and organise the common development concerns of a particular locality, mainly at the village level. However, over time, RSP staff noted that the LDOs were transforming into small professional NGOs and distancing themselves from the communities.

To counter this professionalisation phenomenon the RSPN developed a graduated strategy in 2005–2006 to scale up existing community organisations. In an effort to ensure that this form of institutional development would be sustainable, LSO development would occur in two stages: (1) the community organisations would form a village development organisation (VDO) at the level of a revenue village[6] or village and; (2) over time the VDOs would form an LSO. The decision was both time- and location-appropriate, in as much as community organisations were already in place and working informally. However, they were not registered and had virtually no administrative and financial systems, which prevented them from accessing additional donor funds or initiating large-scale development projects.[7]

The main objectives of the LSO, therefore, are to: provide a localised permanent support system to foster and nurture the grassroots organisations of community organisations and VDOs; scale up social mobilisation locally through low-cost measures (compared with RSP staff support); and provide an institutional facility to promote development linkages with service agencies in government, donors, NGOs, and the private sector.

The RSPs facilitate LSO formation at the union council level when the community organisations cover a significant proportion of the households. The RSP's role is to provide both financial and technical support in the development of the LSO. The RSPN has developed operational guidelines and sample bylaws for the LSO, training modules for LSO activists, orientation and management training modules for RSP field staff actively involved in the programme, and monitoring tools for the LSO programme (Azizi 2006). Figure 1 shows the LSO structure.

As Figure 1 shows, the LSOs are formed at the union council level. They form the apex of a triangular three-tier structure built up from household level community organisations, which coalesce into VOs/VDOs. In turn, these merge into LSOs. The three tiers are linked through an electoral process aimed at ensuring transparency and grassroots representation. Recent initiatives involve federating some of these LSOs at the *tehsil* or *zillah* (district) level.[8]
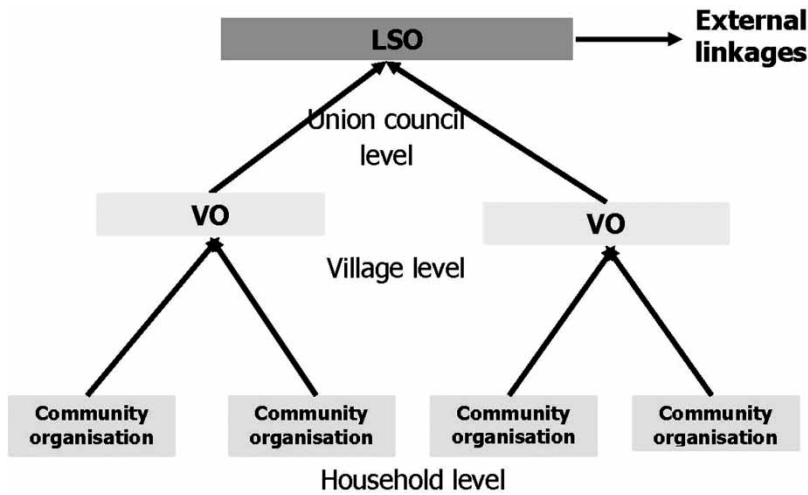
Figure 1: Local support organisation structure

The LSO governing structure is two-tiered, consisting of the General Body and the Executive Body and supported by paid staff for office functions such as accounting and bookkeeping. A seven to 11-member Executive Body is elected by the General Body from among its members. The LSO assets and liabilities are owned and borne by its members with the Executive Body as the custodian.

Conceptual framework: LSOs as a form of social capital[9]

In the context of rural development, latent (norms, mutual trust, reciprocal obligations, and net-works) or active (spontaneous collective action) social capital is viewed as critical to mobilising communities. Some of its typical manifestations are traditional village institutions, organis-ations, events, mutual aid traditions, and the pre-eminence of customary law and traditions of social and development work. Conceptually, the LSOs represent the upper end of a process where latent or active social capital is shaped into community organisations at different tiers that interact with each other and engage in institutionalised collective action.

Our country-wide survey responses confirmed the existence of such latent or active social capital. Traditional village leadership functions increasingly involve intermediation and com-munity development activities rather than traditional enforcement. Mutual aid traditions are also strongly entrenched: over 60 per cent of respondents observed that they helped each other in time of need. Over 35 per cent of respondents stated that they participated in collective activities as members of various local *tanzeems* (organisations). Of these, a roughly similar per-centage observed that women from their households were also members of these *tanzeems*. The collective activities were diverse in nature, including awareness-raising, internal lending, savings generation, support to women, support to poorest, community physical infrastructure, and social-sector activities (health, education). Close to 60 per cent of the respondents noted that customary law (*rivaj*) was the prevalent law in the villages. They also ranked it higher than legal recourse. Over 60 per cent of the respondents stated that the informal institutions (*panchayats*, *jirgas*) also performed development and social functions. Also, strong traditions of mutual aid and collective action have always existed in the domain of natural resource management. Rural communities were and continue to be dependent on local resources for

sustenance. The natural resource management systems that have evolved over time are techni-
cally sound and socially sustainable.

These manifestations of social capital have transformative potential, evident in the new
organisational forms they have taken, such as the community organisations, VOs, and LSOs.
We can view these organisations as constructed social capital in the sense that the organisations
formalise or give shape to both latent and active social capital. Constructed social capital also
has a relational context. It is embodied in the links between the community organisation and the
development NGO (RSPs in this case). Further up the tier, the network of community organis-
ations, or cluster organisations, created to address supra-village needs represents social capital
(LSOs in this case). Recapping, we view the grassroots organisations at the various tiers, the
relationships they embody within and across tiers, and the foundations of these relationships
as social capital. The expectation is that this social capital will lead to a flow of institutionalised
collective action that enhances well-being.

Research design and method

By the end of March 2010, 306 LSOs, the unit of analysis, had been formed, of which 23 were
exclusively women's organisations. Table 1 lists the 49 LSOs that the RSPN was supporting at
the time of the field survey. Of these, the RSPN identified 18 LSOs for us to review, three exclu-
sively women LSOs, based on temporal, spatial, and performance criteria.

The RSPs' mandate is to work with the poor across Pakistan; their development interven-
tions, social and microfinance, specifically target the poor. As such, they constitute the
sphere from which we drew our sample for the household survey. The RSPs use poverty scor-
ecards to identify poor households. The scorecard was developed by Mark Schreiner as a tool
that is straightforward and easy to implement in the field.[10] It entails using poverty indicators
based on expenditure patterns, starting with a large number (150) and paring down to less than a
dozen. The process entails using correlation with observed and verified poverty so that it is poss-
ible to predict the likelihood of being in poverty with a high level of confidence. The paring
down process eliminates indicators such as those not relying on direct observation or those
that are overlapping. The ten indicators arrived at by the RSPs cover diet, durable goods in
use, house facilities, and cooking fuel in use. The scores range from 0 to 100, ranging from

Table 1: Rural Support Program Network (RSPN)-supported local support organisations (LSOs), as of
30 June 2009

RSPs	Total	Formed before 30 June 2006	Formed before 30 June 2007
AKRSP	12	10	1
BRSP	2	0	0
SRSP	7	3	2
NRSP	14	5	3
TDRP	8	3	2
PRSP	2	0	0
Women's LSOs	4	1	3
Total	49	21	8

Notes: RSP, rural support programme; AKRSP, Aga Khan RSP; BRSP, Balochistan RSP; SRSP, Sarhad
RSP; NRSP, National RSP; TDRP, Thardeep RSP; PRSP, Punjab RSP
Source: RSPN (2009)

most likely to least likely to be in poverty and households in the bottom quintile are considered poor by the RSPs. We required the LSOs to identify households with higher poverty rankings and, subsequently, during survey implementation the survey teams were able to confirm compliance.

Originally, in selecting the samples for the target and control groups, we opted for a combination of random and purposive sampling. The reason for the latter was twofold. First, as we indicated, the sampling universe was the poverty scorecards for the union councils that the RSPs/LSOs had prepared. Many union councils were large with dispersed villages, which would have extended us beyond our logistical and budget capabilities. Second, women-headed households were under-represented using poverty scorecards. We addressed these two problems as follows: first, we imposed a cut-off, reducing the sphere to only those villages which exceeded a specified population; second, we stipulated that 15 per cent of the sample consist of women. After these purposive adjustments, we opted for a 5 per cent sample size in proportion to the village population.

Subsequently, we made changes based on field experience. First, several poverty scorecards contained flaws, in that they included children as household heads; household heads had migrated with their families; the scorecard included family heads who had passed away; and some names were in duplicate or triplicate. Thus cleaning was needed in the field. Second, we discovered after about 100 interviews that there was little variation in responses. Thus, we settled for a fully purposive approach. First, we opted for a uniform sample size of 100 respondents each for the target and control groups across all LSOs, regardless of the union council population. However, we spelled out the following conditions:

- Gender balance (50:50) in the sample
- Focus on the poorer households using verified poverty scorecards
- Ethnic and religious representation
- At least 90 per cent of the respondents to be simple community organisation members and not office-holders.

We stipulated these conditions to the LSO management bodies and they identified the households from their records and facilitated the interviews.

Methodologically we used a triangulation approach (Olsen 2004) for the LSO evaluation and collected data through project observation, questionnaires soliciting agent/beneficiary perceptions, interviews, focus-group discussions, case studies, and secondary sources/documents. We also interviewed RSP staff members and while we recognise this could inject bias, it was necessary to gain perspectives on policy, programmatic, and operational issues which households may not be familiar with.

We also added a comparative dimension by introducing a control group for each LSO we evaluated. We twinned the nearest union council without an LSO with the LSO under investigation in order to determine whether the LSO had made a difference in terms of well-being and autonomous collective action. The control groups had a RSP presence, so our focus was a comparison of LSO-led villages compared with RSP-mobilised villages. Since there were no benchmarks we could draw on, a before–after study was not possible. While we are confident we collected valuable social information, given our sampling, the findings are suggestive only.

The questionnaires went through several iterations at RSPN and were pre-tested prior to implementation. The survey teams consisted of four to five enumerators headed by a field survey supervisor. We mostly used local teams for each region to cater to linguistic needs and to ensure local commitment. The lead researcher accompanied the teams for the substantive part of the survey, which lasted 5.5 months, from August 2009 to mid-January

2010, and conducted intensive training sessions in each region to familiarise the enumerators with the study scope, objectives, and methodology. At the end of each day in the field the lead researcher reviewed a sample of the questionnaires and conducted periodic brain-storming sessions to obtain feedback and to ensure that the enumerators remained on track.

We developed checklists for the focus-group discussions, one each respectively for males and females in the target group, and identically for the control group. Each focus group discussion was restricted to 10–15 participants; at a minimum, 3 community organisations were represented; we ensured that the participants had not been interviewed previously and they were not community organisation office-holders. In general, while the RSPs facilitated the surveys extremely capably they were professional enough to understand and comply with our request to distance themselves from the interviews and focus-group discussions.

The informants for the interviews represented a cross-section, consisting of community members and representatives (local elders, school teachers, and social activists), RSP field staff members, both active and retired, line department officials and microfinance bank representatives. We also conducted discussions with the LSO board, Executive Body, and General Body members, and with RSP management staff.

Findings

The three sets of findings referred to in this section are drawn from two sources. The first and third sets are derived from parts of the household surveys, where women were the exclusive respondents. The second set synthesises the lead researcher's personal observations and interviews with key stakeholders, including decision makers and project/programme implementers from the RSP/LSO management cohort, and informed individuals among the beneficiary community.

Gender–LSO interface

In this section women responded to questions regarding the degree to which the LSOs were sensitised to their concerns. The majority of women respondents noted a predominantly male representation in the LSO/VO governing bodies. However, this disparity did not prevent discussions on a wide range of women's issues at the General and Executive Body meetings, with over 80 per cent of the respondents indicating as much. Key issues and concerns raised at these meetings affecting women included health, education, livelihoods, and vocational training, indicating that women's empowerment was one of the LSO priorities. The majority of female respondents also confirmed that they were consulted on activities affecting them at the LSO General Body meetings and that the decisions taken subsequently were consensus-based (by the showing of hands).

Over three-quarters of the women responded that LSO-managed projects/activities were pro-poor and pro-women. The benign training-credit nexus formed the dominant part of both LSO and RSP activities. However, RSP projects/activities were more diverse, and understandably so as they have the edge in terms of time and experience. More than 90 per cent of female respondents noted that women were able to access the credit the LSOs were on-lending. An almost equal proportion indicated that women could use community organisation savings, both for their own use and in the form of internal lending.

More than four-fifths of the female respondents observed that women's income had increased. Building their capacity through training and providing credit to utilise this capacity were the two key contributing factors. A nearly equal proportion of women indicated they resultantly enjoyed higher social benefits in the form of improved nutrition, health, and education for children. We also documented case studies where women said they had become economically

and socially empowered via microcredit. While we are aware from other studies that men appropriate either the credit or the income accruing from it, we did not come across such admissions from the women in our study. One reason could be the socialisation process, where the RSPs initially and LSOs subsequently have sensitised women to their important role in the family. In fact, over 60 per cent of the female respondents in the target group observed that women's decision-making powers had increased, compared with slightly over 50 per cent for the control group. The perception was uniform across LSOs, with only six LSOs not concurring. These powers were fairly wide-ranging. Women's rights and contributions formed a key component of the LSOs' awareness-creation efforts.

Reprising global findings, this study affirms that women are beneficiaries of microcredit; in this case through the instrumentality of the LSOs. Women exhibited a strong need for the organisational and financial support extended by the RSPs and the LSOs. Both represented avenues for economic, social, and cultural empowerment and for easing their cultural shackles.

Filling vacated spaces

This section demonstrates that women are more rooted in their local environment than men and, therefore, more receptive to RSP and LSO initiatives. The primary reason is that men, driven by economic necessity, out-migrate to supplement the family income and women are filling the spaces vacated by them. This finding is based on interviews. It reinforces the other arguments in favour of an institutional focus on rural women for the purpose of indigenising development among communities. Where women have been assigned such a central role, they have risen to the challenge. We present survey evidence which shows them outperforming their male counterparts in the next sub-section.

Men's livelihood opportunities have extended beyond the village, which may explain why their community organisations and village organisations tended to become dormant once the RSPs disengaged from their current role. In contrast, women's spaces continue to be centred on the household. They are more receptive to initiatives that allow them to be home-based, such as skills-development, credit, education, health, water, and sanitation. They are also process- rather than outcome-oriented and hence can adapt to changes in the external environment. Indeed, in some cases we noted that the withdrawal of funding had induced internal transformations, where the women's organisations had become self-sustaining entities – both credit- and project-driven. Many of these organisations had internalised the participatory principles that the RSPs had instilled in them and had launched independent initiatives, mostly income-oriented but some focusing on education. Women were also more responsive to training and income-generation opportunities offered by the LSOs.

LSOs have become an important instrument for empowering women. Where women had successfully overcome male-defined cultural barriers, they were confident and protective about their hard-won spaces and rights, and set about asserting them quietly and effectively rather than in an overtly confrontational manner. Further, they represented a cohesive force, which transcended ethnic and religious differences.

However, as we noted earlier, the organisational complexion of the LSOs did not reflect their needs in as much as gender representation in the constituted bodies (Executive Body, General Body) still had a distinctly male slant. There was a similar imbalance in the male–female community organisation and voluntary organisation–women's organisation ratios. While the RSPs are in the process of sensitising men to women-specific issues and have succeeded to a considerable extent, patriarchal/cultural biases inevitably creep in when men are in the majority. The management bodies need to become more gender-balanced in order to minimise these biases. We turn next to how female managerial performance showed up in the LSO rankings compared with that of males.

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Comparative performance

Of the 18 LSOs we reviewed, 3 (namely Sami, Pakistan Hoslamand Khwateen Network (PHKN) and Aurat Development Programme (ADP)) were exclusively female-run LSOs. We ranked the 18 LSOs on various criteria (indicated later) to illustrate how effectively and efficiently the LSOs responded to the needs of their members. The women's LSOs ranked highly on most criteria.

LSO effectiveness was measured by several indicators including: gender equality; savings generation; credit disbursement; reduced dependence on RSPs; and ability to secure internal and external funding. Sami and PHKN ranked first and second, while ADP ranked thirteenth. PHKN and Sami also ranked first and second respectively in terms of their success in raising endowment funds, hence ensuring their financial sustainability.

The women's LSOs also scored highly on project management. PHKN ranked second and Sami seventh on these criteria. One way of assessing the success of the exit strategy was to ask respondents about how dependent the LSO remained on the RSP. In the ranking of reduced dependence, Sami and PHKN ranked first and fourth. There is a very close correlation between reduced dependence and high scores on project management and overall LSO effectiveness.

Conclusions

Overall, we found that women are faring well. Even though the representation in the governance bodies of LSOs/VOs is still disproportionately male, attitudes for gender inclusion were surprisingly positive across the board (90 per cent favourable). There was also a high degree of gender sensitivity in terms of the importance of separate discussion of women's issues, and women found the decision-making process to be open and consultative. Over four-fifths of the women responded that they had access to community organisation savings and a similar number responded that their incomes had increased as a result of LSO activity. As has been found to be more broadly the case, this was viewed to have had a positive impact on the education, nutrition, and health of their children. Two-thirds felt their decision-making powers had improved and in this regard were more empowered.

The women organisations were more active and also more adaptable, and hence capable of doing without RSP support. While the men in general were more outward-looking as a livelihood strategy, women were willing and able to fill in the spaces vacated. Perhaps this also explains why women LSOs took the top two spots in the ranking of LSO's effectiveness.

Acknowledgement

Notes

1. These community organisations comprise anywhere from five to ten households and the number of community organisations in a village varies depending on its population. In peri-urban areas, the community organisations are essentially lane committees, comprising households in the neighbourhood.
2. See www.rspn.org/about_us/introduction.html. An average household size of 6.8 (www.pap.org.pk/statistics/population.htm#tab1.3) means an outreach to about 28 million people.

3. RSPs have received some initial government support for an endowment but are on their own beyond that.
4. Shoaib Sultan Khan, the first General Manager of the AKRSP, conceptualised these cluster organisations in the early 1980s.
5. Other RSPs, especially the National Rural Support Program and the Sarhad Rural Support Program also supported apex bodies of community organisations at the village, union council, and *tehsil* levels in relatively mature communities.
6. Revenue villages are defined for tax purposes and are much larger entities than a regular village. The latter represents more cohesive communities that social mobilisation is centred upon.
7. In 2002, mature community organisations also began to register themselves as Citizen Community Boards (CCBs) as envisioned in the Local Government Ordinance (Government of Pakistan 2000), but even these organisations relied heavily on the technical support of the local RSP.
8. For example, the Chitral Network of LSOs, Ghizer Network of LSOs, and Dargai Network of LSOs.
9. For a detailed literature review of social capital in the context of rural development refer to Khan *et al.* (2007: chapters 1 and 2). A detailed assessment of the LSOs as an exit strategy with the associated institutional detail is contained in a companion paper.
10. See www.uniteforsight.org/global-health-university/poverty-scorecards.

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