Subject: AKRSP Local Support Organisations (LSOs)

It used to take me eight hours from Gilgit to reach Yasin valley on a bone-shaking and precarious jeep track, in many places suspended in the air over the river with a sheer drop of hundreds of feet. Once I had come across a distraught young woman sitting on the roadside, whose whole family of eleven members had fallen off the cliff with the jeep in the river. By sheer luck, she was thrown on the road when we arrived on the scene. Dead bodies were floating in the river by the submerged jeep and Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) Nazrab, who was accompanying me, without losing a moment, hurtled down the steep slope, as if he had been electrified and rescued many lives. Today I did the journey in three hours in an airconditioned Land Cruiser on a smooth black top road.

At Taos Yasin, we were greeted by the members of the Al-Karim Development Organisation, the LSO of Taos-Yasin Union Council alongwith representatives of the Gakuch District LSO Network, Hatoon, Teru, Immit and Chattorkhand LSOs besides Taos.

The best news that the LSO gave was that according to Poverty Score Card of the Taos UC, out of 1405 households, only one was graded as extremely poor. On my query “couldn’t the LSO wash away this black mark by helping the household to get out of this category”, the response was positive.
Taos LSO has indeed developed in an institution of the people being managed and governed by volunteers with professional support of employees of the LSO answerable to the LSO Board and Chairman. The most redeeming feature was the emergence of young leadership. The old guards have willingly handed over the management of the LSO to the younger generation, especially in case of women. Many of the youngsters have grown up watching evolution of VO/WO in LSO and indeed some were the children of former VO/WO presidents and managers.

On the linkages front, the LSO has forged linkages with local government departments, agriculture, livestock, Baitul Mal, AKDN and BISP besides donors and other development agencies. RGM Gilgit Region informed me that as compared to 10 linkages forged by AKRSP for the VOs/WOs last year, the LSOs have forged 300 linkages currently.

It is only the financial viability of the LSO which remains to be seriously addressed. Currently the operational cost of the LSO is being met by a grant of Rs. 30,000 per month from AKRSP. This grant is promised for two years and in some cases, LSOs have already received it for three years. I wish AKRSP would have listened to the advice to give the total amount of support upfront and also left it to the LSO to recruit their professional staff instead of burdening them with an expensive recurrent management cost. Anyway, what is done is done. The challenge for LSOs is how to raise Rs. 360,000 per annum to defray the recurrent cost. Taos LSO with Rs. 5.5
million savings and a revolving fund of Rs. 1.3 million given by RSPN and AKRSP should be able to meet this challenge. What the LSO should aim at is a revolving fund of Rs. 3.5 million.

In all the LSOs I visited in Punyal Valley, Gojal Valley, Hunza Valley, Nagar Valley, Skardu Valley and Baltistan LSOs representative, I underscored the importance of financial viability of the LSOs for sustainability. In Baltistan, they would match it with an equivalent amount to make LSO financially viable. I think AKRSP should take up this offer of theirs in collaboration with RSPN, on condition that the LSO should fulfil their part of the obligation first and revolve Rs. 1.5 million for six months to a year to qualify for the AKRSP/RSPN share.

The LSO District Network idea is the logical evolution of the concept of the fostering of institutions of the people. I was delighted that Gakuch District LSOs have on their own taken this step and got the Network of LSOs registered in March 2009. The initiative has been taken by Rosamand of Hatoon with the following objectives and functions:

i) to act as a peace forum which is essential for development;

ii) to organize human resources of the district;

iii) to deal with district level government departments and other development agencies;

iv) to share experiences;

v) to strengthen grassroots institutions;

vi) to do district planning;

vii) to forge linkages; and

viii) to act as a pressure group for lobbying for the legitimate rights of the district.

On return from Taos, we stopped at the PTDC Motel overlooking Khalti lake, which was formed overnight by a massive mudflow during my tenure as General Manager, AKRSP. Hussain Wali did his best to blast the mudflow to drain out the lake to reclaim the agricultural fields of the inhabitants of Khalti devoured by the formation of the lake due to the dam created on the river. A dam of this size across the river would have taken engineers years and massive machinery and manpower. Nature created it in a few hours. Fortunately there were no human casualties. The lake now provided a most scenic background to the motel.
At Sust a last minute change in the venue of the meeting of the Gojal Rural Support Organisation (LSO) took me to Nazimabad (Sust Bala) instead of the usual meeting place by the side of the tunnel channel. From the helicopter, I could see 8,000 kanals of land developed which is now priced at Rs. 3 lac per kanal. AKRSP had given only Rs. 3 lac assistance to Sust VO for tunnel channel. The whole area of Sust was a far cry from what I had seen on my first visit in December 1982. The venue had to be changed at the last minute on the insistence of the representatives of Agencies who considered the gathering of people in such large number a security hazard. I only came to know of the change on my return from the meeting, when the old office bearers of the VO, full of rage and ire appeared on the scene accusing the LSO office bearers of depriving them the opportunity to meet me. They brought a beautifully painted huge banner with the name of the 60 members of the VO who had constructed the Tunnel Channel. I was greatly pained at this disappointment of the people. But in our country, Agencies are supreme these days. Who can challenge them? In the name of security, they can crush the feelings of the people.

The Ganesh Development Organisation (LSO) is totally women centred with a male and female MBA from Nagar as the professionals of the LSO. The proceedings of the LSO were conducted by women, something unthinkable, when AKRSP initiated its programme in Nagar. Ganesh LSO has both Ismaili and Shia villages in its membership with Jan-e-Alam, who is also a member of the District Council playing a lead role. The financial viability of the LSO was also thoroughly discussed here too.

I was happy to see Syed Yahya Shah at Nilt amongst the LSO members of Minapin Rakaposhi LSO who came to meet us. From a single crop, the area has now become double crop.
The fruit processing business received a setback with the bombing of the Hasho Group of hotels, the LSOs main buyers of the fruit pulp. I suggested search for alternate markets through RSPN assistance by putting them in contact with marketing experts like Shahnaz Kapadia.

After a long discussion with LSO Activists at Skardu and visit to Hussainabad Sada Hussain LSO, the proposal for matching grant for revolving fund for LSOs was given by the LSO representatives. At Hussainabad, the RSPN grant for community investment fund was used by the LSO not strictly according to the guidelines given by RSPN. Instead the LSO gave part of the grant to non-poor but ensuring a recovery of Rs. 60,000 per month for on lending to the poor according to the terms and conditions laid down by RSPN. Of course this meant delayed access to CIF of the poor but it created confidence in the LSO in managing CIF. RSPN should not try to strictly enforce the terms so long as the capital is not put at risk. As Akhter Hameed Khan used to advocate an organic, pragmatic and sociological approach. The LSOs will learn by doing.

This was a most uplifting and invigorating field visit and I am most grateful to Izhar for arranging it and to RGM Gilgit Muzaffar whose vision of fostering institutions of the people is mirrored in the LSOs I visited, is indeed the key to the sustainability of AKRSP. Nazir in Baltistan, in a very short visit, arranged an excellent exposure for me.

By good fortune, I could not have asked for a more pleasant and congenial company on this visit comprising Shahida Jaffrey, Masood, Shandana and the new Vice Chancellor of Karakorum International University Dr. Najma Najam who accompanied us to Hunza and Skardu. My thanks to Al-Nashir for making the helicopter available without which it would have been impossible to cover so much ground. Bokhari and the Swiss pilot were most considerate and patient and the flights were par excellence.