

Candidate Profile of Shoaib Sultan Khan, Pakistan, January 2009

Unleashing the power and potential of the poor: the story of Pakistan's Shoaib Sultan Khan and his lifetime campaign to eliminate rural poverty.

There is a belief that is shared by many of the world's great cultures that the most important possession of any man or woman is their story. However it takes a truly exceptional man or woman to dream a remarkable story and then live it, because although the results for other people may be astonishing and profound, the personal costs can be very high. This is the story of one such exceptional person who, as a young man, dreamed a remarkable story and then set out to live it; a story that has affected and enhanced the lives of millions of miserably poor and disenfranchised people of South Asia; a story that has been lived despite personal costs and losses for his much loved family that may well have overwhelmed a lesser person. This is the story of an essentially humble and self-effacing man whose name is respected and loved in countless poor villages across the entire Indian sub-continent and adjacent lands and islands; this is the story of a man called Khan, Shoaib Sultan Khan.

In the late 1950s, following the resounding success of the American led Marshall Plan in rebuilding a war-shattered Europe, the developed world's attention switched to the millions of poor rural families who lived in abject poverty in most of the newly independent countries of Asia and Africa. Very quickly a development formula was evolved by agencies and institutions in the richer, western countries, a formula which specified a number of seemingly logical steps. Although there were many variations of this formula, the underlying theme was that improvements needed to be brought to bear on traditional systems where endemic poverty exists, and that these improvements would be derived from developed systems in what came to be known as 'the west'.

Poverty alleviation projects invariably involved employing a team of consultant experts mainly derived from western countries. These teams were to become an ubiquitous part of an essentially flawed process. It was the task of the teams to study a particular system and then develop a number of ideas into a fixed 'blueprint' that would form the basis of a development project. More often than not, the people 'to be developed' played little or no part in the determination of the activities they would be expected to be involved in and for which their government would be loaned or granted large sums of money. In the years that followed, donor governments and agencies and recipient governments were continually confounded at the dismal failure of most of these projects, the debt levels of developing countries rose alarmingly and rather than diminishing, there was a dramatic increase in the number of families living in poverty.

So profound was the failure of traditionally planned and executed development projects that by the late 1980s many donor countries decided that development simply did not work and began to divert their resources to disaster relief and other short-term relief work. Poverty alleviation was beginning to be seen as an intractable and possibly unsolvable problem.

During the 1960s and 70s, at the same time as most of the major aid agencies continued to waste millions of dollars on an obviously flawed method, a small group of dedicated individuals began to work on an entirely different approach. This approach was based on the conviction that development can only really succeed if it comes from within, from the people, and that in order to achieve this state, the rural poor need to be empowered, and their innate, incredible potential needs to be unleashed. One of the stalwarts of South Asia of this approach was the late Dr Akhtar Hameed Khan, a man from whom Shoaib Sultan drew great inspiration and guidance and in whose laboratory at Comilla (then East Pakistan) he sat at his feet to learn the basics of working with the poor.

This unleashing of the potential of millions of families of rural poor in South Asia and elsewhere has been the life's work of a singularly dedicated, self-deprecating and essentially decent man,

Shoaib Sultan Khan. His simple and unchanging message has been that while 'organisations for the poor' are needed, to light the match which starts the unstoppable bonfire of 'organisations of the poor,' is at the heart of the success of anti-poverty programmes.

As Mr. Khan said in an interview with Pakistan Television in December 2008, "*the underlying belief and principle for poverty alleviation is that the poorest of men and women have an innate potential to come out of their poverty. The question is how to remove obstacles for the poor and unleash this potential. People need to come together into their own organisations, to identify honest and committed local activists to work with them and to create a strong capital base through savings. Once the people are willing to do this, a support organisation...can partner with the poor to remove obstacles to their poverty.*"

Thus, since 1982, Mr Khan went on to create Pakistan's Rural Support Programmes (RSPs), and a Network of nine RSPs today exists in Pakistan. Shoaib Sultan Khan is the Chairman of the RSP Network. It is through guiding these RSPs that he has been able to reach out to millions across South Asia. During a career spanning more than 54 years, Mr. Khan has confounded a skeptical world time and again and no less so by his resignation from the elite ranks of the Pakistan civil service, in order to be free to pursue his ideals. His achievements have been legion and many remain unremarked, but none have been perhaps more famously remarkable than the transformation of the lives of the poor in the remote mountainous and isolated north of Pakistan, where he set up and led the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) for over a decade, during the 1980s and 90s. As a village activist said in 2008¹ at an emotion-charged meeting, "*Shoaib Sultan has planted a seedling in 1983 which has now grown into a large tree*".

Mr Khan's own journey to work for the poor started in Peshawar, Pakistan, in the 1970s, when he was leading the government's Daudzai project. Key members of his Daudzai team have stayed with him till today, working in the RSPs, taking the message country-wide. Shoaib was bitten by the bug, the power of the people to create change. He left his prestigious civil service job for Sri Lanka where he joined UNICEF to manage the Mahaweli project and apply his newly learnt lessons.

In the Northern Areas during the 1980s, and in association with His Highness the Aga Khan, Mr. Khan founded the AKRSP which, under his dedicated and inspired leadership, was to rise from humble beginnings in a shop front in Gilgit bazaar, to an international icon that attracted the great and powerful like moths to a bright flame. Although unsought by this essentially private man, he was to become a revered legend throughout the region. Known as a man of untiring energy, unlike any before him, he walked the mountains, shared their hardships and sat down with villagers and listened, and in so doing unwittingly won their hearts. '*He is a man we will never forget*' is a statement heard in village after village; a man who showed the people the power of unity, how to unleash their potential and to find their own way out of poverty, a man they came to love. By the time Mr. Khan left the Northern Areas in 1991 real incomes had doubled, community organisations were thriving, abject poverty had largely been eliminated and a legend had been created.

The legend did not stop when Mr. Khan left the Northern Areas. Instead, it went on to affect the lives of more than 2.3 million of the poorest villagers across the country through the Rural Support Programmes progressively established under the leadership and example of Mr. Khan during the 1990s. Today these Rural Support Programmes provide support to nearly 132,000 community organisations, where people come together to debate and decide what is best for them. Women, in particular, who have long been denied a voice in a traditionally conservative society, for the first time in their lives, are involved in a range of remarkable programmes of their own devising, programmes that will open up their world and the future worlds of their daughters. Every Rural Support Programme is a result of Mr. Khan's energy and vision, and under his leadership the RSP Network represents Pakistan's largest programme of non-government,

¹ Syed Sardar Hussain, Chairman, Biyaar LSO, Chitral District, NWFP.

grassroots institutional development, providing leadership in micro-finance, health insurance for the poor, community managed infrastructure schemes, community managed disaster operations, employable skills and community managed schools.

While this ongoing and hugely successful story of poverty alleviation in Pakistan is significant, Mr. Khan's work and ideas have transcended borders that are otherwise fraught with bitterness. Remarkably and in an enormous gesture to peace in the region, it is in India, in the State of Andhra Pradesh, where the story has really taken off. Guided by the Society for the Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP)² and starting in the late 1990s, one of the fastest growing and most successful poverty alleviation programmes in India, if not the world, has empowered millions of the poorest women to lift themselves out of abject poverty. Women who once could not even think of traveling to the nearest town, women who once lived roofless and hungry, women whose husbands would have forbidden them to travel, are now trained, confident and competent activists, taking the message of social mobilisation to other women in other States, women activists who regard Mr. Khan as their 'guru', a man they respect and revere, a status that tends to embarrass this essentially humble man.

The CEO of SERP in Andhra Programme, T Vijay Kumar, pays glowing tributes to Mr Khan when he says *"The Andhra Pradesh poverty eradication programme, 'Indira kranthi patham', is deeply indebted to Shoaib Sahib (a title of 'Mr' in Hindi). The programme is fully supported by the Government of Andhra Pradesh and now encompasses 9.6 million poor women organised into 810,000 Self Help Groups. These groups have accessed Rs.120 billion credit till 2008 and in 2009 alone they are poised to access Rs.110 billion credit from the banks. Large numbers of poor women have started coming out of abject poverty, thanks to this programme. The beginnings of this programme were very humble. A pilot project called the South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme commenced in 1995, covering 100,000 families in 500 villages. This was funded by the UNDP. The design was based on the social mobilisation and empowerment of the rural poor that Shoaib Sahib has so successfully demonstrated in Pakistan. We were very fortunate that Shoaib Sahib, as Senior Adviser UNDP, guided this process with so much concern and passion. His advice was always very practical and down to earth. We looked forward very eagerly to his visits as they energised us and inspired us. From 2000 onwards the programme was scaled up, in phases, to cover all the 35,000 villages and all the rural poor households in the State. We were indeed fortunate that we had the support of Shoaib Sahib, even after the completion of the UNDP project. He instilled in us the core belief that the poorest women and men have the innate capability for coming out of poverty, and, that the institutions of poor are critical to enable them to unleash their innate energies. By following Shoaib Sahib's advice and belief in the poor people, we have been able to unleash our own innate potential. That is his greatest gift."*

The message has not only affected the lives of millions of rural poor it has also inspired an entire generation of professional men and women in Pakistan and across the entire subcontinent. As T Vijay Kumar (a member of the elite Indian Civil Service) says *"This process has not only changed the lives of the poor, it has changed our lives too. In unlocking the power of the people, we have also unlocked our own potential. It is difficult to explain this. One has to experience it. At the same time, I feel guilty that it has taken us (in India) 60 years after independence to achieve this. We have wasted so much time"* and because so many of the most important international agencies and donor countries, in Kumar's words, *"still do not get it"*, the waste goes on.

The story does not stop here, it has traveled under the UNDP programme to include Nepal, Bangladesh, the Maldives and Sri Lanka, the island where in the 1970s Shoaib Sultan Khan became famous for changing the Mahaweli Valley scheme from a potential agricultural disaster to a settlement success, one of the first areas where the ideas of social mobilisation were brought into play. It was also while at Mahaweli that the famous 'Man called Khan' article appeared in

² A programme initiated by the State Government of Andhra Pradesh and initially piloted by UNDP's South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme, to whom Mr. Khan was Senior Adviser. SERP is now funded by a special World Bank programme.

Newsweek magazine, and it was from the success of Mahaweli that Mr. Khan went on to head the ground-breaking Aga Khan Rural Support Programme.

And it has not only been development professionals who have been profoundly influenced and affected. In Pakistan, Mr. Khan is regarded by many as an elder of the civil service. There are still hundreds of retired or serving civil servants and others who have been inspired by Mr. Khan's unflinching honesty, integrity, and fairness. However the cost of retaining personal integrity has been high. At times in the past his quiet but emphatic stand against corruption and his mission of justice for all, has placed Mr. Khan in dramatically dangerous and life-threatening situations. However, today he dismisses and describes these events as '*mere ripples on the pond of life*'.

Mr. Khan's greatest wish is never to have to give up his quest to alleviate poverty, never to have to give up his continual search for those he calls '*the bright stars of my life*', the men and women who will continue to carry the message of letting the people decide what they want to do to come out of poverty and seek ways to help the rural poor achieve their dreams of living decently. He cites as his greatest source of happiness when someone else 'copies' his message and methods as "*this in itself is recognition of the universal applicability (of the message)*".

Over the years Mr. Khan has also been the beneficiary of unsought international acclaim and national recognition for his dedication to improving the lives of the poor. These awards and acknowledgments include countless requests to speak at eminent gatherings or participate in counsels to consider how to alleviate poverty in the world. An eternally restless man, Mr. Khan maintains a relentless travel schedule in pursuit of poverty alleviation. "*There is so much still to do*", he explains "*and so little time left to do it*". In 1990, the President of Pakistan presented Mr. Khan with one of the country's highest awards, the *Sitara e Imtaz*, and to his amazed surprise, in 1992 the President of the Philippines presented Mr. Khan with the prestigious Magsaysay Award. Again in 2006, the President of Pakistan conferred on him an additional prestigious award, the *Sitara e Eisar*, an award that Mr. Khan spontaneously handed on to a leading woman village activist saying in his famously self-effacing way, "*I do not deserve such recognition. It is the people who should be awarded. I have done nothing but help them realise their own potential.*"

This last award was given in recognition of Mr. Khan's leadership in adversity when over 70,000 people lost their lives in the earthquake that struck northern Pakistan in 2005. The award was in recognition of the massive contribution made by RSP staff and the communities, working under conditions of extreme stress in Pakistan's earthquake affected areas, one of the largest scale relief and reconstruction programmes in the world. However, with Mr. Khan it is not just a matter of organisation, it is one of immense empathy that makes the difference. As Ghulam Jilani³, a community leader who lost his daughter and his home in the earthquake said, "*In those moments of adversity and grief, Shoab's presence in our midst and his sensitive empathy with our loss gave us the strength to cope. The institutions that he had helped us to create, which respected our values and worked with our integrity, were our greatest source of support through those days of trials and tribulations*". And so it has been, right across the Indian sub continent, wherever Mr. Khan has taken his message of hope to the poor, a belief that this man not only speaks the words, but speaks them from his heart.

The world's best ideas are usually simple and poverty alleviation is no exception. The beauty of Mr. Khan's message is in fact its simplicity. It is as he has said time and again simply, "*to let the people decide what they want to do to come out of poverty. An outside agency (national or international) with a pre-conceived package will never succeedopportunities for poverty alleviation differ from one poor household to another and indeed from one location to another*". There is no one blue-print, no single answer or package of answers that can be universally applied. Instead the message is based on the **principles** of giving value to people's diverse needs, and it is the principles themselves that are universally replicable.

³ Ghulam Jilani, President Kaghan Development Organisation, a cluster of community organisations, Kaghan Valley, NWFP, 2006.

In this way, millions of families across the entire Indian subcontinent and beyond now have the means to begin to realise their dream of coming out of poverty. Once the poor have identified their 'portfolio of preferred opportunities' it is the RSPs' job to provide the vital kick-start, the first step, the initial loan, the provision of expertise or equipment – whatever it is that a community, group or individual family requires to take that vital first step out of poverty.

In all of this Mr. Khan has always include government, firmly believing that the State has a vital role to play; that government services can be more effectively delivered through community organisations; and that in the long term, it is only the State that will be able to command and provide sustainable services as no donor will ever have enough money or stamina to undertake this task. In short, Mr. Khan's vision is one where a new mode of partnership will emerge in countries such as Pakistan and India, a true and equal partnership between the rural poor and the once distant State, with the RSPs acting as a broker between government and the people.

In the world of today, poverty is acknowledged to be one of the root causes of the insecurity and chaos that faces an increasingly populated world. Where there is poverty there is discontent, violence, resentment and helplessness. Where there is poverty the potential for intense social anger and disillusionment is immensely magnified. Where there is poverty the agents of hate will flourish and grow and the peace of the world will be at risk. In this world where peace is increasingly fragile and the risk of violent conflict ever increasing, the alleviation of poverty has never been more important. Already working with millions of people who once lived in abject poverty, Mr. Khan's message has provided an immense contribution to peace in a region where war is an ever present threat and a reality. His message has the potential to reach out to millions more, a message to people to get together and eliminate poverty, to eliminate hatreds, a message of peace.

This is a summary of a life lived well; a summary of the remarkable story of Shoaib Sultan Khan; a man, known affectionately as SSK (Shoaib Sultan Khan) amongst his colleagues; a man for the people; a man of the people; an agent of change; an agent of peace.
