

Rural Communities in the Fight against COVID-19

This panel is being organised by the Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN). It will discuss the work of RSPs and rural community institutions, as partners to government during the COVID-19 pandemic in Pakistan and the potential for future collaboration between community institutions and government. The partnership for COVID-19 related work was formed under the aegis of the National Command and Operations Centre (NCOC), set up by the Government of Pakistan to manage the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The collaboration between community institutions and the government started in May 2020, with provincial governments taking the lead, resulting in 66 District Administrations and District Health Departments working with rural community organisations fostered by the RSPs in 1500 rural union councils. Health Departments trained community activists in awareness raising and Trace, Test and Quarantine (TTQ) activities. The RSPs facilitated the link between community institutions and Government, as a public service to Pakistan. As of October 2020, over 7000 rural activists have been trained and are working in spreading awareness about COVID-19 in the villages in their Union Councils (UCs).

RSPN is the country's largest network of civil society organisations in Pakistan, consisting of nine Rural Support Programmes (RSPs).¹ The RSP approach is centred on 'organising' people into their own development institutions that ensure that decision-making is more participatory, that make poor communities the owners and drivers of development initiatives and that can effectively partner with government to improve public sector planning processes and service delivery. A range of initiatives have been implemented by these community institutions across Pakistan, since 1982, when the first RSP was set up, i.e., the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP). This has contributed to people's economic and social uplift. Generous support has come from the GoP, which has set up and supported the larger RSPs. Support has also been forthcoming from foreign donors and some from the private sector. As of October 2020, the RSPs have worked with rural people who have formed 496,352 Community Organisations (COs), with a membership of 8.6 million (representing 8.4 million households). CO membership is 52% women. COs are federated upward at the village level to form Village Organisations (VOs), and VOs are federated at the UC to form Local Support Organisations or LSOs. Currently, there are 28,174 VOs and 2184 LSOs. These institutions exist across 4401 rural UCs in 149 districts of the four provinces, Gilgit-Baltistan and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) and many have partnered with the government for the delivery of basic services.

The GoP approached the RSPN in April 2020 to involve LSOs in these trying times of the COVID-19 pandemic. LSOs rose to the occasion, demonstrating their ability to work voluntarily for their communities and coordinate with District Administration, particularly the District Health Departments in 66 districts. Apart from creating widespread awareness through community institutions, rural activists have also done some 'contact tracing' and reporting of suspected COVID-19 cases, to the Health Departments. It is time that the Government formalises its

¹ RSPs include Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP), Balochistan Rural Support Programme (BRSP), Ghazi Barotha Tarakiati Idara (GBTI), Institute of Rural Management (IRM), National Rural Support Programme (NRSP), Sarhad Rural Support Programme (SRSP), Sindh Rural Support Organisation (SRSO), Sindh Graduates Association (SGA), and the Thardeep Rural Development Programme (TRDP).

relationship with community institutions and expands this to help people rebuild livelihoods that have been impacted by COVID-19. The panel will discuss the following:

1. What were the relative strengths and weaknesses of this high-level strategic collaboration between state and citizens (community institutions) during the ongoing joint initiative?
2. How can RSPs, Community Institutions and government build on this experience, to 'formalise' the collaboration between government and community institutions, with RSPs facilitating this process?

The panel will consist of:

Moderator

Ms Shandana Khan, CEO Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN)

Panellists

Dr Rashid Bajwa, CEO National Rural Support Programme (NRSP) will speak on NRSP's experience during the trying times of the COVID-19 pandemic and the work of NRSP undertaken nationally under the NCOC umbrella. NRSP was set up with the support of the Federal Government and he will also touch upon NRSP's relationship with government and future avenues of collaboration.

Mr Nadir Gul Barech, CEO Balochistan Rural Support Programme (BRSP) will speak on how BRSP and communities addressed the challenge of working in Balochistan during the COVID-19 lockdown and pandemic. He will speak on how BRSP can facilitate the future work of the government in the province, specifically in times of disaster.

Mr Asadullah Faiz, Joint Secretary, Federal Ministry of National Health Services Regulation and Coordination will speak on the experience of the Health Department, under the NCOC umbrella, of working with the RSPs and the community institutions, including the pros and cons of this partnership and its future potential.

Ms Shabana Iftikhar, Community Activist from Rural ICT (NRSP) was awarded a prize by the Prime Minister of Pakistan for her work against COVID-19 in her community in rural areas of Islamabad. She will speak on the work she did, the challenges she faced and the successes she had.

Panel Organisers

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