

# Ngo's and Community Empowerment: A Case Study of Ismaili Community in the Northern Areas of Pakistan

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## Abstract

*A government is responsible for the welfare of its citizens, its legitimacy drawn on the basis of services it provides. But not so in Pakistan, where social services are neither disciplined nor organized. Our society is plagued by countless social evils but the governments have not taken appropriate and effective measures to root out these evils. There is no government response, at any level, to citizens' basic needs. Therefore, human poverty is becoming a major obstacle in attaining a decent standard of living and for enjoying the fruits of real freedom. Being the most vulnerable segment of society, the poor are always the first ones to be harmed and the last ones to be heard. Poverty in Pakistan had been challenged little since independence and the indifference practised by those in high authority has left little room for manoeuvre among non-governmental organizations and self-help groups. In a resourceful country like Pakistan, loopholes in the state structure are the result of discord or failure of the nation in measuring up to the expectations of the poor masses. However, a few non governmental organizations have rendered a yeoman service to the down trodden people. Representative community-based organizations and self-help groups of the Ismaili or AghaKhani Community are such examples. These faith-based, voluntary and philanthropic groups have directly influenced over the social and economic day-to-day life of the people of the Northern areas of Pakistan. The main object of this study is to focus the community-based development activities of AghaKhan network in the social sector by highlighting untiring efforts of the Ismaili community for the uplift of their area on a self-help basis.*

Social reforms aim at the improvement of the quality of life of the people in a country. Reform, in one way or another is, therefore, a perennial question. It is in fact progress. A country in which there is no reform and no desire for betterment is stagnant; indeed it is worse than stagnation. It is in the state of degeneration. Social reforms are very important because a nation is judged by the standard and conditions of life of its

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population in general than its political institutions or religious ideals. In Pakistan, particular attention has not been paid to reforming the basic social sector (health, education, employment etc.). Even after half a century of its independence, the government of Pakistan does not assume the prime responsibility of providing social care to all the citizens in the country. According to the country's "constitution", government is bound to address itself to the social problems by providing Primary, preventive, curative and rehabilitative services to the entire population in every nook and corner of the country i.e. the Provinces and the Federally Administered Units. However, the country remains divided along parochial lines and state authorities (civil-military elite) have continued to posture exclusive, narrow interests. **Indeed, the country has failed to define a political experience that offers the prospect of social achievements.** In this chaotic atmosphere, attempts are being made to exercise social reforms by patriotic, far-sighted and mindful community-based self-help groups in the country. Undoubtedly, the Ismaili Community has become a role-model for non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, self-help groups and of course, the government.

### **Re-emergence of Ismaili Community as a Civil Society**

After six long centuries of sheer dormancy, the Ismaili Community, which is a significant and the second largest sub-sect of Shia Islam, reemerged from the region of Indo-Pak Sub-continent under the dynamic leadership of Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah Agha Khan-III (1885-1957). Sir Agha Khan cultivated close relations with the British and actively participated in the Indian Muslim politics as well as international politics (of his time) until the advent of world war II. During his frequent visits to western countries, he was recognized as a dynamic Muslim leader.<sup>1</sup> Impressed by the concept of "civil society" (emerged during seventeenth century), Sir Agha Khan initiated his activities by establishing different institutions under the Agha Khan Development Network (AKDN) to form a civil society in the Ismaili Community of South Asia. This faith-based NGO network contained two basic pragmatic programs related to the community in particular and the political awareness of the masses in general. The Ismaili community blindly followed the precepts of their leader and rendered honorary / voluntary services by donations, time, energy, knowledge and education with utmost sincerity and loyalty.<sup>2</sup>

All these developments were based on social works with multiple-dimensions. Within a century, the Ismaili community developed substantially and achieved progress by adopting an attitude of peaceful and tolerant coexistence within the society, avoiding active participation in traditional politics, modifying themselves according to the circumstances and by equipping themselves with modern education and skills in the united India and after partition of the sub-continent. The social activists of Ismaili community never allowed dogmas or conservative approach to create hurdles in their quest for establishing a civil society. Sir Agha Khan-III successfully inculcated such ideas that led to a smooth functioning of community development projects. After his demise in 1957, Prince Karim Agha Khan-IV succeeded his grandfather Agha Khan-III.<sup>3</sup>

Under his enlightened leadership, Ismaili institutions mushroomed significantly and by the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, Agha Khan Development Network contained eight agencies, working for social uplift, for instance, the Agha Khan Foundation, Agha Khan Educational Service, Agha Khan Rural Support Program, Agha Khan Planning and Building Services, while one supporting agency is functioning for economic development in tourism, industry and financial services (called Agha Khan Fund for Economic Development). The Ismaili Community, mainly resides in the Indian State of Gujarat, Mumbai and Delhi, whereas, they can be seen in the northern areas, Punjab, Sindh, Balochistan (coastal belt of Gwadar) and a few parts of NWFP, in Pakistan.<sup>4</sup> Particularly, in the northern areas (Chitral, Ghizer, Gilgit, Skardu, Ghanchi and Astore) the social and economic growth denotes that the Ismaili Community is heading towards a sustainable civil society.

## **An Introduction to a Few Organs of Agha Khan Development Network**

### **The Agha Khan Rural Support Program:**

AKRSP was established in December 1982 by the Agha Khan Foundation to help improve the quality of life of the villages of northern areas of Pakistan. In order to achieve its objective, AKRSP has promoted diversified, sustainable and equitable economic development through the provision of economic resources and opportunities. AKRSP's role essentially has been that of a catalyst for rural development supporting the progress of village level institutional structures, which provide a forum for local communities to organise and initiate activities for their social and economic uplift. AKRSP's approach towards participatory development has been based on three basic principles:

- Organization and cooperative management
- Capital generation through regular savings
- Skill development at the grassroot level

This approach has led to the development of two models, an institutional model for community mobilisation based on the formation and strengthening of broad-based village based institutions and a production model based on skill development and technical innovations.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Institutional Model**

Under the institutional model, the emphasis has been on organizing local communities of the area (Ismailis as well as non-Ismailis) into village-based organizations, called VOs (Village Organizations) and women organizations (WOs) to ensure participation and representation of these segments of community in the development process. By the end of the year 2002, AKRSP had helped foster and develop more than 4000 village and women organizations in the program area. These

village organizations have, on the one hand, attempted to institutionalize collective action at the village level in order to fill the leadership vacuum at the community level, and on the other, have provided a formal receiving mechanism to enable communities to intake the development services and assistance provided by various delivery mechanisms.

### **The Production Model**

These VOs and WOs have become a pivotal point to steer clear the course of development in the valleys of northern areas of Pakistan through strengthening social capital building processes and building local capacities to empower communities to take charge of their own progress and destiny. Although initially fostered by AKRSP, these village and women organizations have become an independent source of production. These organizations work in various fields of production with complete flexibility and autonomy and undertake their own autonomous developmental agenda. Indeed, AKRSP has encouraged these organizations to develop a wide variety of linkages with other agencies of the Agha Khan Development Network, service provider foreign agencies and even local government. AKRSP's social mobilization approach has increased economic opportunities and its stress on quality of life has been widely replicated both within the country and abroad.

AKRSP fostered village and women organizations are formed:

- Only after a large majority (between 70-100%) of village households elect to become members.
- By defining broad-based groups that are encouraged to undertake multiple functions.

AKRSP's strategy for rural development through community involvement and mobilization has produced the phenomenon of institution building at the grassroot level.<sup>6</sup> This institutional maturity is the outcome of a number of research and evaluation efforts undertaken by AKRSP consultants and trained researchers. To identify factors which determine the effectiveness and sustainability of these institutions, AKRSP has, since the last twenty years been carrying out hectic research. It is not surprising, therefore, to see that the rural support program movement in rest of Pakistan has been drawn extensively on AKRSP's experience in the social sector.

In the recent past, a comprehensive institutional maturity survey (IMI) was carried out, that for the first time, attempted to quantitatively grade VOs and WOs based on their perceived maturity, estimated through a composite index, which itself consisted of many wide-ranging individual indicators. To fully capture the evolution and essence of social capital building in northern areas of Pakistan, it is exceedingly important to recognize the diversity of grassroot institutions and their performance. The conceptual framework and the results of the institutional development exercise are as follows:



**A: The Village Organizations**

**Table 1.1**

<b>Regions</b>	<b>Total VOs</b>	<b>VOs in IDE</b>	<b>% Coverage</b>
Gilgit	580	509	88%
Astore	96	82	85%
Chitral	604	580	96%
Baltistan	675	522	77%
<b>Total</b>	<b>1955</b>	<b>1693</b>	<b>87%</b>

**B: The Women Organizations**

**Table 1.2**

<b>Regions</b>	<b>Total VOs</b>	<b>VOs in IDE</b>	<b>% Coverage</b>
Gilgit	418	388	93%
Astore	53	45	85%
Chitral	221	220	100%
Baltistan	162	135	83%
Total	854	788	92%

The following tables indicate community groups that have demonstrated the capability of undertaking their own development in a mature and sustainable manner, having an in-built capacity to access greater development opportunities.

**A: Village Organizations**

**(Percent of VOs)**

**Table 1.3**

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Gilgit</b>	<b>Chitral</b>	<b>Baltistan</b>
Trained experts in agriculture	61%	55%	52%
Trained experts in enterprise	9%	4%	24%
Education sector linkages	65%	43%	27%
Health sector linkages	40%	16%	8%
Marketing linkages	12%	13%	7%
Self-initiated infrastructure schemes	30%	24%	28%
Self-initiated schemes in education sector	23%	9%	19%
Self-initiated schemes in health sector	9%	1%	5%
Collective marketing system	2%	2%	0.2%

**B: Women's Organizations**

**(Percent of WOs)**

**Table 1.4**

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Gilgit</b>	<b>Chitral</b>	<b>Baltistan</b>
Trained experts in agriculture	70%	78%	63%
Trained experts in enterprise	9%	4%	2%
Trained experts in non-AKRSP sectors (LHV/TBAs etc.)*	87%	79%	0%
Education sector linkages	24%	20%	9%
Health Sector Linkages	29%	10%	3%
Marketing Linkages	14%	6%	7%

\* LHV – Ladies Health Visitor

\* TBA – Traditional Birth Attendant

It is clear from the following tables that all three regions of the northern areas vary in terms of achievement rates on the various sub-indicators under participation.

**A: Village Organizations**

**(Percent of households in VOs)**

**Table 1.5**

<b>Indicators</b>	<b>Gilgit</b>	<b>Chitral</b>	<b>Baltistan</b>
VO coverage of households	63%	69%	93%
Agriculture package beneficiaries	54%	37%	56%
Livestock package beneficiaries	25%	18%	18%
Forestry package beneficiaries	56%	52%	61%
Infrastructure project beneficiaries	62%	70%	90%
Members' attendance in meetings(%of VO)	58%	63%	76%
Households accessing credit	55%	26%	31%
Participation in selection of office bearers	98%	77%	95%
VOs assistance to WOs in infrastructure (%of VOs)	20%	33%	3%

## B: Women Organizations

### (Percent of households in VOs)

Table 1.6

Indicators	Gilgit	Chitral	Baltistan
WO coverage of households	68%	59%	84%
Agriculture package beneficiaries	64%	43%	74%
Livestock package beneficiaries	41%	25%	35%
Forestry package beneficiaries	33%	8%	52%
Members' attendance in meetings (% of WO)	61%	67%	77%
Households accessing credit	3%	30%	11%
Participation in selection of office bearers	93%	96%	94%

**Source:** The above mentioned data in the tables has been compiled from various publications of policy and research section AKRSP core office.

## The Agha Khan University Institute for Educational Development

### Professional Development Centre, North:

The success of an educational system lies in the fact as to how effectively it is maintained, monitored and evaluated. In a country, where expenditure on education in the public sector remains below 3% of the GNP, the talk of quality education simply becomes a farse, for wishful thinking leads to the little wish fulfillment ! The private sector is, however, supplementing the government's "efforts" to improve the literacy rate and expand basic education qualitatively and quantitatively. In the northern areas of Pakistan, PDCN (Professional Development Centre, North) is one such example of enhancing the efficiency of the system of education, privately at local level. PDCN works under the able guidance of the Agha Khan University Institute for Educational Development. PDCN has made appropriate adaptations to its well-known 'Whole School Improvement Program'. Since 1999, PDCN's 'Whole School Improvement Program (WSIP) has operated on the premise that there can be little development without school improvement. It therefore, considers the entire school, rather than individual teachers, as the unit of educational change and aims to develop the whole school as a community of leaders.<sup>8</sup>

PDCN organizes an intensive, month-long orientation program for the heads, deputy heads and faculty of the project schools. The participants are helped to develop school development plans (SDPs), which they upgrade in consultation with fellow teachers, village educational committees (VECs) and school parents. The

comprehensiveness of the SDPs and the farsightedness which they develop, give the audience genuine optimism that there would be sustainable improvement in the project schools. The growing sense of collaboration between community and the school management has produced positive results, qualitatively as well as quantitatively, in the entire educational sector of northern areas of Pakistan.<sup>9</sup>

### **Training Programs and Reinforcement Workshops**

Evaluation and monitoring of education entails a very complex procedure. All criteria to measure an educational system are complicated by the fact that almost all measurements are indirect and based on subjective judgments. Evaluation might be based on inaccurate and unreliable information. Unlike examination, which is designed to measure the knowledge, skills, feelings, intelligence or aptitude of a student, evaluation is not focused on the student. It seeks to assess the program – its administration, teaching and support strategies.<sup>10</sup> The whole school improvement program (WSIP) is one of the PDCN's major initiatives in order to bring about improvement in the quality of evaluation and monitoring. In accordance with PDCN's mission to develop human capacity, teachers from each system of education in Gilgit, Skardu, Ghizer, Gojal, Ishkoman and Ghanchi are trained by Master Trainers (MTs), who are normally high profile university teachers (both foreign and local). The process of planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating help the school in attaining a better understanding of meaningful teaching and learning.<sup>11</sup>

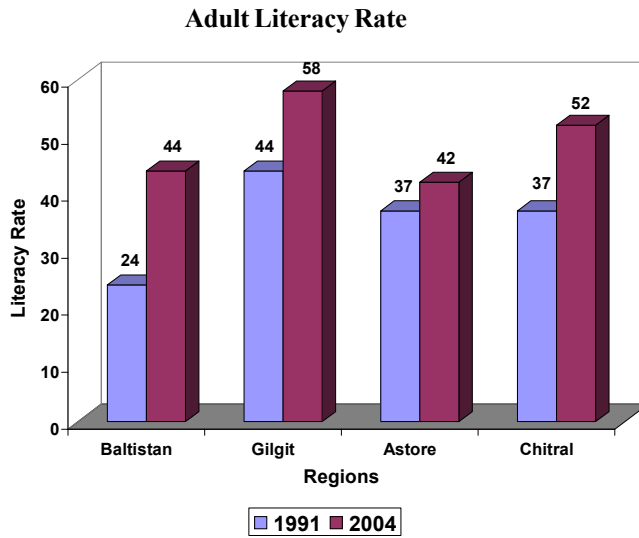
The word “reinforce” means strengthening, something that was done in the past. Reinforcement workshops are one of the key components of PDCN's (WSIP) and are held every year. The purpose of these workshops is to provide an opportunity to teachers for reinforcing their past learning and experiences. One of the effective aspects of these workshops is that each lasts for ten days, which help teachers think continuously about their subjects. Most of the course participants have reproduced extraordinary results for their institutions by sharing their experience and learning with teachers from different backgrounds and contexts. All this has helped in raising the literacy rate of the northern areas, approximately to an average of forty four percent.<sup>12</sup>

**Table 4.7 Adult Literacy Rates**

<b>Years</b>	<b>Program</b>	<b>Baltistan</b>	<b>Gilgit</b>	<b>Astore</b>	<b>Chitral</b>
1991	36	24%	44%	37%	37%
2004	48	44%	58%	42%	52%

People Aged 10 and over who have had at least primary education.

**Fig. 4.1**

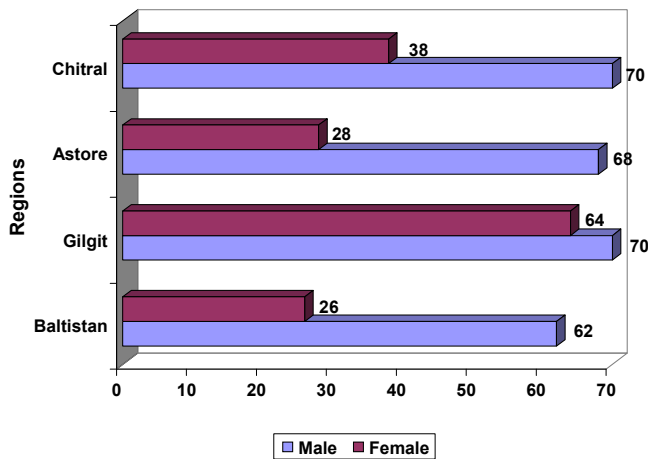


Source: PDCN Centre for Research and Development

**Table 4.8 Comparison of Male / Female Adult Literacy for 2004:**

	Program	Baltistan	Gilgit	Astore	Chitral
Male	64%	62%	70%	68%	70%
Female	38%	26%	64%	28%	38%

**Fig. 4.2 Comparison of Male – Female Adult Literacy for 2004**



Source: PDCN Centre for Research and Development

## **Conclusion**

The goal of empowerment of the down-trodden classes can be achieved through the efforts of individuals, organizations and the communities themselves. They are the ones whose struggle to gain space in the social, political and economic fields provides the empowerment mechanism for the oppressed people. Oppression is defined as the state of being caught between systemically related forces and barriers that restrict one's opinions and options, immobilize a community, moulds and reduces perceptions. To bring about social changes among those afflicted by extreme and widespread poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, disease and displacement, the so-called government projects (expensive projects) for effecting a shift in the attitudes of the recipients have failed or have even led to a further deterioration in their conditions. The liberation of the victims from the shackles of poverty and ignorance through empowerment was the goal set by representative NGOs of the Ismaili community in the northern areas of Pakistan. These organs of Agha Khan Development Network have worked relentlessly to bring about an organized social change among the various communities, particularly the Ismaili Community, who remained unaware of their basic rights in the past. AKDN's three basic concepts: Communication (the process of information exchange); development (process of societal improvement), and empowerment (process of gaining control over social and economic conditions) have been exercised successfully in the target areas. Even today, programs based on the above mentioned concepts enjoy greater popularity among the people than government projects.

By working to remove traditional constraints and equipping the people with the necessary know how to help them overcome critical barriers, the Agha Khan Development Network has germinated changes in the social life and attitude of target groups, such as the peasants, women, small businessmen, teachers and students and various sections of the working class. In fact, the role of women organizations and village organizations proved to be crucial and instrumental in bringing about a shift in the social outlook. Services rendered by the Ismaili community for the uplift of the have-nots in the northern areas of Pakistan have been acknowledged worldwide. It is worth noting that major constraints like traditional, religious, gender and environmental prejudices, which always make it difficult to provide relief to the people, could not pose a serious threat to social activities of AKDN. People of the northern areas are convinced that social cultural and religious biases are incompatible with the modern ideology of progress, hence, both cannot coexist. However, they believe that spiritual motivation and mobilization, while keeping themselves aloof from political controversies, is essential for the success of a developmental project.

Development is a process of liberation from injustice, oppression and discrimination as associated with all the major religions and their various schools of thought. Therefore, there is a general need to realize that participation is the basic right of the people, and not merely a means to measure development goals. In addition to above, the information about Agha Khan Development Network's activities need to be disseminated, displayed and furnished to the concerned quarters in all the Provinces

and Federally Administered Areas to help-fetch new strategies of poverty alleviation for the poor masses of Pakistan. Though social change is a complex, disordered, unstructured and uncontrollable process, empowerment provides the necessary skill, confidence and a countervailing power to deal with the needs and resources available. It is now recognised that society can be empowered through active community participation, that community discussion and decision making, consistent with cultural and spiritual values, play a pivotal role in the overall development of a society.

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