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## **Improving livelihoods**

There is scant authentic research available on alternative and effective rural development approaches in Balochistan. In common development parlance, we usually end up producing data about the macroeconomic indicators of poverty in an econometric fashion and hence we reduce poverty to a technical matter as a domain of experts.

Real poverty, however, exists at the household level and the best experts of poverty reduction are the poor themselves. Poverty reduction has a strong human angle which is missed out in macroeconomic technical debates and the sophistry of highly paid policy experts. Poverty reduction is about improving livelihoods at the household level which needs participatory and bottom-up development approaches. The scaling up of these participatory approaches of poverty reduction produces impressive outcomes with strong social policy implications. They address the most fundamental barriers to development, such as the poverty of means through context specific development planning, and the poverty of voice by making the poor as the real experts of poverty reduction.

This is demonstrated in a recent research report on Balochistan produced by Dr Babur Wasim a development economist and **Tariq Junaid, executive director of the Institute for Public Opinion Research (IPOR)**. They have produced a pertinent research piece on ‘Improving rural livelihoods through [a] bottom-up development approach in Balochistan’. I am pleased to share with readers a summary of research by the authors in their own words.

“Balochistan is not only the poorest province of the country but also the most susceptible to welfare shocks, including natural disasters, macroeconomic adjustment and, more recently, the Covid-19 pandemic. The World Bank’s Pakistan update of April 2021 noted that the pandemic “is expected to have the largest increase in poverty incidence” in Balochistan.

“We conducted a survey in three districts of Balochistan (Kech, Khuzdar and Loralai) in April 2021 to assess how the EU-supported Balochistan Rural Development and Community Empowerment (BRACE) Programme had impacted poor households. The grant component of BRACE is being implemented in nine districts by the National Rural Support Programme (NRSP), Balochistan Rural Support Programme (BRSP) and Rural Support Programmes Network (RSPN). Our study was commissioned by the RSPN.

We identified the poor by using data from the poverty scorecard, developed by the World Bank, which is used by several government and donor-aided programmes. Three interventions by BRACE helped more than 10,000 poor households when their economic condition was becoming progressively worse. One-third of the beneficiaries received this assistance in 2019 and two-thirds in 2020. One intervention is an interest-free loan from a revolving fund managed by community institutions. The average loan amount was Rs27,500, which the beneficiaries invested in livestock, agriculture and micro-enterprises. This increased average monthly income by Rs1,600, which is 11 percent of this group’s average income.

The poorest among the poor were given a different intervention, a productive grant of Rs47,000 each on average (in comparison, the Benazir Income Support Programme provides Rs24,000 as grant to eligible families). This, too, was invested in livestock, agriculture and micro-enterprises. It increased average monthly income by Rs3,100, which is 23 percent of this group’s average income.

The third intervention – the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) – increased average income by Rs3,300 per month, or 16 percent of the beneficiary group’s average income. Eighty percent of the sampled beneficiaries had acquired training in sewing, cutting and tailoring, and the remainder in various other trades.

The survey also revealed that 47 percent of interest-free loan beneficiary households, 45 percent of productive grants beneficiary households and 51 percent of TVET beneficiary households to higher bands of the poverty scorecard, from lower band 0-23 (poorest band) to 24-100, non-poor band.

The main uses of increased income across all three beneficiary groups were expenditures on food, clothes, healthcare and children’s education. These findings came from qualitative evidence collected through men and women beneficiary focus groups. Beneficiaries consistently pointed to several specific ways in which their additional income helped improve food consumption for all household members (including children), access to healthcare (particularly for women and children), and children’s education.

The beneficiaries, as listed in the records, are overwhelmingly women, but activities supported through the three interventions are household activities: the listed recipient as well as the spouse are involved in decision making, and the spouse and other household members often contribute labour. Approximately 65 percent of the women beneficiaries contribute labour to income-generating activities, but their dependence on their husbands is greater than that of the men on their wives.

Each of the three interventions opens up opportunities for the poor. Each and every household decides what suits them in view of their capabilities, local markets and constraints. The implementing partners don’t tell them how they should use their investment. As a result, the poor in a given area make their investments in dozens of ways, and the range of their choices is not adequately captured by the three categories of livestock, agriculture and micro-enterprise.

The process that enables the poor to identify opportunities is called the micro investment plan. This, in essence, is a conversation with an open mind in a village setting, facilitated by the RSPs for small self-help groups of 15-25 women or men. The implementing RSPs offer capital and training, knowing from experience that the poor, when engaged as partners in honest discussion, look for opportunity, not handouts. The RSPs do not impose decisions based on market surveys or area plans or because experts say that poultry, goats, sheep, shops, embroidery or donkey carts are good for the poor.

The implication is that an investment is pro-poor only if poor households are empowered to identify and implement it. Poverty exists at the household level, and it cannot be reduced unless poor households are identified, organised and assisted. Administrative and elected institutions have their own strengths but they cannot identify and organise poor households. This is a challenge for which independent support organisations such as the RSPs were established, and for which, over the years, governments and donors across the country have supported them.

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