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# The art of social mobilisation helping people to combat the spread of COVID 19 in Balochistan

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By: Zahra Rao, Assad Abbas Malik & Muhammad Adil

As of the 25<sup>th</sup> of June 2020, Pakistan has had above **198,882 confirmed cases** and **4,035 deaths** because of COVID-19. Pakistan not only shares a border with China, the epicentre of the outbreak of the novel Corona-virus, but is also bordered by Iran to the West, a country with one of the highest number of deaths due to the novel Corona-virus. Added to this close proximity to the outbreak, is the fact that the healthcare delivery system of the developing country is ill-equipped to combat the virus and the challenges posed by a pandemic.

Many parts of the country have been under lockdown since mid-March, with the federal as well as provincial government encouraging citizens to work from home and practise social distancing. This has resulted in a large-scale economic slow-down for an economy already operating under austerity measures. In such tiring times, the poorest and marginalised are most at risk. Fortunately, many philanthropic individuals and organisations have come together to mobilise funds and services to serve and protect the disadvantaged in this time of need. Balochistan Rural Support Programme (BRSP) implementing the EU-funded Balochistan Rural Development and Community Empowerment (BRACE) Programme, is one such organisation.

### Reaching each and every household

BRACE aims to empower and help graduate out of poverty, the rural poor of 9 districts in Balochistan. The implementing organisations, Balochistan Rural Support Programme (BRSP) and National Rural Support Programme (NRSP) have been working in these districts for over two and a half decades, helping the rural communities set a bottom-up, democratic, Social pillar comprising three-tiered community institutions; Community Organisations (COs) operate at household level, Village Organisations (VOs) function at village level and Local Support Organisations (LSOs) represent the voice of people at Union Council level. Through these institutions of the people, the Social Pillar has access to each and every household, and is able to mobilise them for common causes. Under the BRACE Programme almost 300,000 households are being mobilised into 19, 129 Community Organisations (COs), 3, 103 Village Organisations (VOs) and 249 Local Support Organisations (LSOs). This network of people has been active in 9 districts of Balochistan (Jhal Magsi, Kech/Turbat, Khuzdar, Killa Abdullah, Loralai, Pishin, Duki, Washuk, and Zhob) under BRACE since 2017 and the LSOs have spearheaded numerous development initiatives like polio vaccination campaigns, tree plantation drives, ensuring all community members have CNICs, advocacy for girls' education etc. With the unfortunate onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the LSOs, aided by BRSP and NRSP, have taken on the challenge of spreading awareness and protecting their local communities.

By using the tried and tested lens of social mobilisation, BRSP is tapping into the organised network of COs, VO and LSOs to access the rural poor in need, in a well-structured and efficient manner in this time of crisis. The LSOs, with their expert knowledge of their localities, are being employed to distribute food packages to household.

### Connecting the Social Pillar with the Administrative and Political Pillar

Social Mobilisation has led to the formation of a Social Pillar which is self-sustaining, but once connected to the Administrative and Political Pillars of the country, its utility increases tenfold.

The LSOs, serving as the backbone of the Social Pillar are proving to be essential in helping the government access each and every household. The Government of Pakistan has implemented a country-wide Emergency Cash Programme by the name of *Ehsaas* (meaning empathy), which aims to help 12 million families by providing them with financial assistance of PKR 12,000 per family during this time of need. This development was shared with LSOs fostered under the EU funded BRACE Programme through a social media platform; where members from around a 100 LSOs were representing their community institutions on this social media platform. The LSO representatives were asked to help identify deserving households for the government initiated *Ehsaas* Emergency Cash Fund so they can be registered and supported by the government. So far, 23, 543 vulnerable households have been registered by LSOs.

LSOs have also fostered linkages with the provincial government to coordinate humanitarian efforts. The large-scale lockdown enforced to control the spread of the Corona-virus has affected the livelihoods of many wage labourers who were living hand to mouth. In light of this, the provincial government of Balochistan has announced a relief package for 150,000 families. For this, each district establishes a Food Security Committee which manages the relief package, focusing on beneficiaries' assessment and items distribution. The committee functions at both district-level and Union Council-level. The LSOs fostered under the EU-funded BRACE Programme are a part of the Food Security Committee in each Union Council to facilitate the process. LSOs have connected around 13, 083 deserving households for with District Administration for food packages.

The National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC) has also requested the RSPs of Pakistan, including BRSP to activate its Community Institutions and invite the LSO leaders and volunteers to coordinate with the government in curbing the spread of the virus.

### Mobilising relevant, skilled/capacitated focal persons in each community

Social mobilisation has also helped the implementing organisations in identifying empowered local leaders and philanthropists

in this time of crisis, to come together and help protect their communities against the Corona-virus.

EU-funded BRACE has been preparing the local communities by providing them with disaster risk management training as well as repeatedly highlighting the significance of hand washing and practicing good hygiene.

Under the Adult Literacy and Numeracy intervention, 5,392 women in 9 districts of Balochistan have attended a six-month long course where they are not only taught basic literacy and numeracy but are also made aware of public health issues like water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). This is also done through another BRACE intervention; the Community Awareness Toolkit is a three-day long training which creates awareness amongst the beneficiaries on critical issues like health (Family Planning, Nutrition, immunisation, and HIV&AIDS), education, water, sanitation and hygiene, disaster risk management, gender, environment and civic rights. As of 30<sup>th</sup> April 2020, 5, 727 men and 3, 688 women have been trained on these critical social matters. Furthermore, Community Resource Persons are local leaders, crucial to this awareness and advocacy, who regularly check up on the communities, ensuring their involvement.

Not only has the BRACE Programme ensured that the local rural communities are well-prepared for pandemics like the one upon us now, but the people capacitated are now being employed to fight against the global health emergency. As of 31<sup>st</sup> May, 1, 893 Community Resource Persons and volunteers have been oriented on preventative measures for COVID-19, who further reached out to 43, 124 households in 15 districts of Balochistan in a safe manner.

Technical and Vocational and Education Training is a demand driven training programme under BRACE. It provides open access to the labour market and enhances income generating opportunities, as regards to (self) employment.

In today's time of need, the TVET beneficiaries have been contacted and they are proving to be integral in protecting their resident communities by coming together to produce masks locally. As of 31<sup>st</sup> May, 7,622 masks have been produced by 478 TVET beneficiaries, trained under various Skills

Development Programme including EU funded BRACE Programme, in 8 districts of Balochistan.

#### Providing context-based humanitarian aid

Social Mobilisation allows for all stake-holders to gain a deeper understanding of the field and the socio-cultural norms of beneficiaries involved. This understanding is vital to providing humanitarian aid. The rural population of Balochistan does not have access to radio and TV broadcasting, unlike that of Punjab. With such limitations, awareness campaigns around the novel corona-virus are difficult to carry out. However, BRSP is employing numerous other methods to reach the rural poor at risk. Mosques in Pakistan hold credibility and have traditionally been used to make public announcements. With this in mind, BRSP has engaged 1, 115 Mosques in 260 Union Councils to make informative announcements relating to COVID-19. Furthermore, mobile loudspeakers have made announcements in 3, 984 hamlets of 425 UCs to do the same.

The pandemic poses specific challenges to an area like Balochistan which has a history of water shortage. It is difficult to maintain personal hygiene when the rural communities have little access to clean water. To help with this, BRSP has implemented 57 drinking water supply schemes in 6 districts under BRACE. 59.13 million PKR out of 68.38 million PKR are being provided by the European Union, while the rest of 9.25 million PKR have been contributed by the local communities.

The COVID-19 Pandemic is threatening our current way of life how many well-established systems run in the world. However, the rural communities in Balochistan and the way they are coping with the pandemic at hand, are proof that social mobilisation, connectivity and community institutions of the people, are integral to any country's ability to face such global challenges.

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