

## Holding the Partners Together

After two decades of unhindered work across the province, the issue of Baloch nationalism has adversely affected SAP-PK's outreach to remote areas. It was just as well that Balochistan Coordination Council was in place since 1997. Today BCC very effectively plays SAP-PK's operational and program roles in remote areas of the province. Starting as an organ to maintain linkages between the various RDP graduates, the not very long journey of BCC certainly has been a very interesting one.

At the certificate distribution ceremony marking the end of the 1996-97 RDP, participants from Balochistan decided in favor of a set-up to maintain contact. Earlier, after the first RDP ending in 1992, a Rabita Council had come into existence only to fall into dereliction shortly afterwards. And so BCC was formed with RDP graduate Yasmin Mughal as its provincial coordinator. Yasmin had attended RDP from her organization where she worked as an administrative officer. As it turned out, choosing Yasmin for the training had been an error of judgment on the part of her management. It was nonetheless all for the better for the cause of the development network.

Funded by donations, the organization was registered as a development NGO and ran a number of rather highbrow, fees-charging schools across the province. The schools as well as the NGO were owned by the man who was also the lifelong chair of the board of directors while the various principals and teacher made up the general body. What the chairperson said was law and the proceeds from the schools were the man's personal profits. The while Yasmin had spent with the NGO before RDP, nothing had seemed out of order in this system. But now she made comparisons between what she was learning about the working of NGOs and what she saw at her place of work.

Now, during the training sessions the need to disseminate the new learning was impressed upon the participants. When Yasmin tried to do that at her place of work, the chairperson told her there was no need for these useless exercises. She was instructed to continue her training to the end so that the NGO could then forward a project proposal for a large sum of money to SAP-PK. Yasmin had meanwhile learned that SAP-PK was no conduit for funds, it was more of a capacity building institution and that her own employer was a bit of a scam.

But her job as the administrative officer gave her access to the telephone and fax, a facility she used to the full benefit of BCC. Moreover, operating without an office, BCC used the premises for holding their periodic meetings. Held after hours, the meetings were unknown to the chairman or the rest of the staff until the day the chairman happened to look in.

That was the end of the meeting, but the feeling that Yasmin harbored since the first RDP session now became stronger: that there was something to be done for the cause of community development but that her employer's platform was not the one from where to accomplish it. She resigned and taking over a room in her home established the BCC office. With a monthly contribution of Rs 200 per member (at the time there were only

eight members) and the full moral and technical backing of SAP-PK, the council was in business with the express goal of acting as a node for communication and coordination between its members.

Communication enhancement was a simple enough objective to work for. It was meant to keep the entire network of RDP graduates in the know of each others work so that experiences could be shared and where possible replicated. For the first couple of years BCC worked only as a conduit passing information between its various members. Along came the case of Manjipur and it became recognized as a strong platform for advocacy.

Situated in Nasirabad district on the border with Sindh, Manjipur was home to two remarkable young men. Divan Chand and Allah Waraya, both from poor backgrounds, were RDP graduates who ran a small CBO Itehad e Naujavanan e Manjipur. One of their early initiatives was community mobilization through group formation, an exercise that resulted in highly motivated and aware groups of men and women in several villages around Manjipur. Two successful projects added to their goodwill: the distribution of sewing machines among poor women and the institution of health care in an area forever deprived of it.

Itehad hit the headlines in the local press and by and by it came to such a pass that barely a day passed without press coverage of their work. The CBO was doing nothing wrong; it was using the resources of the Social Welfare and Health departments of the government for the benefit of the people of Pakistan. But this largesse was considered the prerogative of the local landlord and now here were two men from humble backgrounds playing his part. When the landlord's threats were dismissed lightly, the man schemed with the local social welfare officer. The Itehad office, always an open house, was raided in the absence of the office bearers. The record and whatever meager assets there were were confiscated and the office sealed under the supervision of the social welfare officer.

Apprised in Quetta, BCC issued a press statement condemning this act as a violation of the charter of Social Welfare Department. This only resulted in the landlord's goons roughing up the two activists in Manjipur. When the case filed in the session court was dismissed without a proper hearing, BCC decided to raise the high court in Quetta and ensured that the case received full press coverage. Before it came up for hearing, thousands of letters covering the details of the Manjipur case were sent out, not only in Quetta but to the three provincial capitals as well as to Islamabad.

The social welfare officer, who had mocked the Itehad activists and had refused to attend the session court in Nasirabad, presented himself at the high court. His superiors had apparently read the letter and judged the mood of the social activists in Quetta. In the course of the hearing, the honorable bench took a serious note of his disregard of judicial summons and for overstepping his authority and gave the man a thorough dressing down. The seized record was ordered to be returned to the CBO and it be permitted to pursue its lawful agenda.

Broadcast by BCC to its members in Balochistan and to civil society organizations nationwide, the Manjipur case became the banner for successful campaigning. This was a singular victory for the development sector in Pakistan. As for Itehad e Naujavanan e Manjipur, it never paused to look back. Flaunting a membership of over five hundred persons spread across dozens of villages, Itehad works on strictly democratic principals with a governing body elected annually.

Its physical spread is now so vast that voting members have to be brought in by hired transport from outlying areas. Working through a network of CBOs and CCBs it helped raise, Itehad is linked with several donors and covers sectors like health, education, political awareness, micro-finance and infrastructure.

In 2003 Yasmin Mughal moved on and BCC leadership fell open. In other circumstances, this could well have spelled death for the group, but BCC had secure democratic moorings. The ensuing elections devolved its leadership upon RDP graduate Amir Mohammad Tareen of Gul Welfare Association in Loralai. In the following years BCC focused on advocacy and awareness raising courses for its member organizations. It also acted as an effective bridge between its members and donors.

The increasing political clout soon became evident when three women employees of an NGO were kidnapped in Mastung. The women being from the Hazara community of Quetta, it became known that their kidnapping was not political, but sectarian in nature and therefore of greater sensitivity with possible threat to their lives. There was of course the added peril of an outbreak of sectarian trouble. Calling together a meeting of one member from each political party, BCC collected on a single platform representatives of opposing viewpoints and ideologies. The pressure that built up thereafter resulted in the release of the abducted women unharmed within four days.

Advocacy was now the keystone for BCC activities. Maintaining close liaison with every political party as well as the establishment in Quetta, BCC became a well-known group respected for its activism and support to the cause of human rights, justice and fair play. The acid test for its influence came with the arrest of Rashid Azam, a BCC member and rights activist. Word was that he had been taken in by the intelligence agencies for publication of objectionable material. Using the same platform as before, BCC moved considerable public opinion through extensive media coverage. In consequence a stream of letters from national and international organizations flooded the establishment. Rashid Azam was released shortly afterwards.

This was BCC's coming of age. It now emerged as a consortium of NGOs and CBOs. When the earthquake devastated Ziarat in October 2008, it was the consortium that moved in with its component organizations to launch a highly coordinated relief effort. It was BCC among all the agencies working in Ziarat that first brought attention to infants who had lost both parents and were in extreme peril. The aid of packaged milk that flowed into Ziarat to help save dozens of young lives was entirely due to the efforts of this consortium of NGOs.

What started in 1997 with a membership of eight individuals now has forty-five member organizations. That means upward of a thousand highly motivated adherents committed to the cause of development, human rights and democracy. This effectively takes the BCC spread to the remotest parts of Balochistan. With such assets, the way ahead for BCC is clearly charted.