

RESEARCH REPORT¹

Devolution, the PRSP and the people of Pakistan

I Background & Justification

Pakistan remains a seriously poor country. It is said that the vicious cycle of poverty lingers in Pakistan in large part due to governance structures which have tended to exclude the most vulnerable segments of society from decision making processes. The Devolution Plan, announced in 2000, was meant to form the cornerstone of the current government's attempt to undertake inclusive development through empowerment of lower levels of government. Parallel to the claims of devolution of political power aiming to increase representation of grassroots aspiration in the political arena, was the rhetoric accompanying the formulation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), which also emphasised the need for greater participation in helping to alleviate poverty.

The PRSP for Pakistan was finalized in December 2003, and in addition to providing a broad framework for poverty reduction it has also been explicitly dovetailed with the process of decentralization. The PRSP itself claims that extensive participatory exercises were held through which views and opinions of a wide variety of stakeholders were solicited while formulating a new poverty reduction strategy. Yet there is genuinely room for scepticism here. There has been little domestic ownership of development policy prescriptions in the past in Pakistan and critics maintain that the only 'participatory' meetings held for the PRSP were those that invited government functionaries and had merger civil society representation. In spite of the resulting lack of legitimacy concerning the participatory nature of the PRSP, the fact remains that a new poverty reduction strategy has been formulated and is now under implementation. Moreover, according to the PRSP itself, the success of the devolution program remains vital for achieving human development, and improving social service delivery, which are of vital significance for the poverty reduction goals of the PRSP.

Given that the second round of local body elections has taken place in October 2005, and that the PRSP is also scheduled to be updated for the next three years (2006 to 2009), this is a good time to examine the assumed synergies between these two reform attempts. It is particularly useful to consider if the emerging realities of the governance reform program initiated by the devolutionary exercise have in fact been conducive for the successful realization of poverty alleviation at the grassroots level. A simple way to find this out is to directly solicit feedback from concerned stakeholders on ground, particularly lower tiered

¹ This research was undertaken based on collaboration between the IPF fellow and the Human Rights Commission for Pakistan (HRCP).

local government officials and politicians, and it is the responses obtained in this regard which are being presented in subsequent sections of this paper.

II Specific Objective

The specific objective of this research study was to assess the ability of local governments, formed under the Devolution Plan, to promote and safeguard socio-economic rights of the people of Pakistan, and particularly to alleviate the prevailing poverty.

III Methodological Approach

The proposed study was undertaken in four selected districts to obtain qualitative feedback through local government officials, and the public itself, concerning the actual impact of the devolution framework on poverty alleviation.

Selection of research sites

The proposed study was conducted in one district of each province; Turbat was selected from Baluchistan, Multan from the Punjab, Sukkur from Sindh and Malakand in the North West Frontier Province.

Stakeholders

Given its focus on ascertaining the capacity of the unfolding devolutionary framework to alleviate poverty, the primary stakeholders of this study included district, tehsil and union council officials, councilors and finally the intended beneficiaries, i.e. the common citizens from locations specified for the study. In Multan, for example, 1 tehsil nazim, 14 councilors; including 4 laborer councilors and 1 kisan (peasant) councilor, were contacted.

Obtaining Feedback

To obtain feedback from the citizenry, semi-structured interviews (refer to Annex 1 for questionnaire) were administered to district and tehsil government officials and councilors, whereas Focus Group Discussions were held (refer to Annex 2), with a more diverse range of participants (including NGO personnel, councilors, journalists and informed citizens), with group sizes ranging from seven to over twenty respondents.

IV Findings of the Research

The location specific findings are first presented, which will subsequently be collated for a collective analysis.

Multan

Discussions and interviews in Multan district highlighted the problem of access to justice and provision of justice by the concerned authorities. A majority of citizens felt that party based local elections would have been more beneficial, and led to lesser corruption and manipulation by the ruling party. It was also mentioned that the law and order, and poverty situation of the country, could have benefited from fair and impartial party based local elections, instead of local elections engineered to consolidate hold of a regime, without any political history.

Many citizens maintained that the preceding phase of local governments (2002 to 2004) had remained inept in dealing with the lingering poverty crisis. One respondent pointed out how many areas lodging underprivileged people were razed to ground, in and around Multan city, so that commercial housing societies could be built. Many poor people living in squatter settlements people are thus left homeless without any land or monetary compensation given by the government. All the ongoing development around Multan city was thus directly hurting a lot misfortunate people, while its benefits would be enjoyed by a relatively privileged minority.

LG (local government) officials in Multan complained that the LG system was still imperfect. It was not yet geared to respond to challenges like poverty alleviation. None of the LG officials present could identify a comprehensive strategy by which poverty reduction was taking place in their district. Whatever replies were given in this regard were random and not connected. One official pointed to a free dispensary was recently established; another said a textile factory is being opened to generate employment. None of the present officials could reiterate nor place their specific examples in a broader framework for poverty alleviation nor did they mention any poverty reduction attempts with a specific interconnection to local governance.

The respondents felt that a critical issue that needs to be addressed within the LG system is that of administration, for it to achieve greater cohesion. Working relations between the Town Municipal Administration (TMA) and the District Government were not considered complimentary. The TMA in Multan has apparently been renting out district government property to generate funds which has created many tensions between the two local government tiers. Participant added that proper checks and balances must be present, especially for the budget allocation and the spending of the money on various projects, and that public accountability and involvement in budget tracking could in fact help ease tensions between government tiers by bringing in a legitimate stakeholder to ensure translation of appointed local government responsibilities into reality.

Multan is a city where people want change. The participants said they were sick of injustice, and of corrupt and manipulative politicians wasting time in turf wars instead of collaborating to achieve betterment of the larger society. They concurred that this transformation can only be brought about if the LG system is in fact made more visibly participatory.

Sukhur

Discussions in Sukhur indicated evident problems with local waderas (landlords) exerting overt control over the LG system. The tehsil and district nazims had not allowed Citizen Community Boards to be established. A participant said that many seats in LG elections remained unopposed in Sindh, as in Tharparkar district where a majority of LG seats were secured without being contested because no one dared oppose the local landed elite. Another participant concurred, adding that even in Union Councils (UCs) where new nazims were elected, they too did not take long in falling prey to the landed elite's influence. Another participants commented that the federal government had, knowingly or unknowingly, demarcated tehsil boundaries in such a way that these areas fall conveniently under the control of a single landlord, further facilitating their control over the LG system by winning political seats.

This monopoly of politics by the landed elite was largely considered to be directly detrimental to interests of the common man for it enabled vested interests that land reforms are never implemented and that the poor population remains subservient to them. Most people agreed that there was little evidence of the new governance system altering such ground realities. The LG officials are themselves blamed for hesitating to take punitive measures against the powerful landlords, and for reserving their wrath for the poor man alone.

Concerning the functioning of the police, especially since the Police Ordinance 2002 was introduced alongside the LGO, the LG officials felt that there was no strong linkage between them. Only select labour, Kisan (peasant), and women councilors were thought to be doing some good, even though they have very limited means at their disposal to significantly effect the overwhelming needs of the marginalized. UCs were having particular difficulties getting their due share of development funds released from the district government.

For their part, LG officials pointed out that a lot of welfare work gets stalled due to hinderences caused by provincial governments, which remain reluctant to share powers with a supplemental layer of authority and instead prefer to exert control over it.

A member of District Council said that most of the government offices in Sukkur are run by landlords who are now nazims as well. This is why he felt that people can't break free from years of despotism. According to this respondent, the private sector has not been supported by landlords unless and until it is in their own interest. Private enterprise motivated by capital is harder for landlords to control than the stagnant establishment. Most of the private sector enhancement has been in the cities in any case. The rural areas have been neglected even by private entrepreneurs.

Probing the issues behind the evident suspicion surrounding CCBs, two main reasons were identified. Firstly, most people don't trust the LG officials who register and oversee the work of CCBs. Citizens are afraid to contribute a share of 20% for development schemes because they feel that government officials will somehow take this money instead of immediately releasing the remaining funds needed to complete their proposed schemes. Secondly, CCBs complained that they do not really enjoy complete autonomy and there is constant interference from local government authorities in schemes implemented by CCBs, due to which they would rather avoid involvement in infrastructural works which were after all the responsibility of the state instead of communities.

Almost every NGO representative agreed that the most important thing for the government to do was to generate jobs and to simultaneously enable people to secure their basic rights. Instead the inverse continues to occur with policies like privatization and the authoritative behaviour of state institutions.

Turbat

Situated in the interior of Balochistan, Turbat has influential drug lords with SUVs and other luxurious smuggled cars. While influential and wealthy, drug lords are said to lack voter support.

Most of the councilors admitted that they have no direct control to make the lives of their constituents better. Even the private sector becomes distorted due to its broader environment.

The Poverty Reduction Strategy Provincial (PRSP) has not been successful or evident in Balochistan. Local facilities like schools and health care are still considered scarce and inadequately managed. An activist cited examples from Tunp UC, where an intermediate college has been made but it still lacks teachers, despite a huge infrastructural investment.

It was felt that if the district governments and the Tehsil Municipal Authority (TMA) had to work as a 'corporate entities', they should try to give contracts to local contractors instead of non-resident bidders. Moreover, most respondents

wanted provincial governments' meddling in local governance to be further reduced. The subsequent revision of the LGO (local government ordinance, under which the devolution plan was implemented) to subordinate all district nazims to the chief minister's authority is hardly the step which addresses this expressed need for greater autonomy. While the LGO revision is meant to remove the recurring tendency of districts to come to loggerheads with their respective provincial governments, representatives in Turbat argued that local governments are closer to the grassroots but they have lesser power to change disparate ground realities.

Concerning the potential for formation of CCBs to enhance citizen involvement in politics, and to help alleviate poverty by improving basic infrastructure across the country, it was noted that these were ambitious goals. Most poor people in Turbat were not aware about how CCBs could be formed or how to achieve empowerment through them. According to the estimate of a journalist, there were numerous CCBs that were registered and even received monetary sanctions for their proposed projects. Yet these were CCBs formed by frontmen of politicians or local government officials themselves to profit through CCB sanctions, instead of being comprised of involved citizens, striving to empower themselves or to make a positive contribution in their communities. Seeing no significant changes evident on ground, people were thus feeling betrayed by the LGO, as they have been by prior politically motivated promises.

Malakand

Malakand is situated in the mountainous regions north of Peshawar. This is a very conservative area. Women are bound tight by traditions and coerced to stay within their homes or behind their veil. Even during electoral campaigns, the female candidates were compelled to affix their husband's photograph onto registration papers instead of their own. Subsequently, their husbands even attend subsequent official activities and this evident dominance makes even the elected women very easily marginalized.

Given such circumstances, it is difficult for female political representatives to reach out and empower other women, who are even more dominated. There are some minorities in the area but they remain marginalized, neglected and vulnerable. Their only coping strategy was to secure the patronage of local influentials. The LG has failed to bring about any improvement in women and minorities' rights in Malakand and its surrounding areas.

Most women councilors in Malakand were not taking much interest in the LG system and rarely attended required meetings. Some people asserted that such women were signing official documents without even reading them and were no more than token gesture of female political representation.

The councilors elected on reserved seats complain that they don't have adequate powers to safeguard the interests of their own communities. Also the local police was alleged to be extremely corrupt and unreservedly manipulated by the affluent. As in Sukhur, the private sector also has not been encouraged by the vested interests in Malakand.

Moreover, a majority of people in Malakand are admitted being influenced by influentials to back particular candidates. Many of them said they would be willing to reject this influence over their voting rights, had they some form of protection against the potential outfall which would result from their assertion of political independence. The need for strengthening civil society to soften the clasp of local influentials seems like a precondition for the empowerment of political institutions.

Resonating impressions and suggestions

Many of the multiple stakeholder forums formed by the LGO have not been activated in practice according to many of the respondents in the study. The Public Safety Commission, for example, was said to exist only on paper. A vast majority of locals did not even know about the purpose of Public Safety Commissions or if they existed in their communities. Many LG officials were also unaware or unconvinced of their utility, since most of them thought that the LGO has completely severed police enforcement from other arms of the state and from the citizenry. While political interference in police matters may have lessened, conversely police violence in jails is said to be rising due to this unchecked autonomy from politicians, it is therefore imperative that citizens fill the vacuum created by the police reforms by becoming more active.

Yet, participation by the citizenry is not easy. Consider for example the experience of the CCBs. In principle, CCBs were meant to enhance the communities' ability and competency to rationally identify issues, articulate vision and challenges, and plan their human, institutional and financial resources to improve social service delivery and to enhance their own empowerment in the process. In reality these have proved lofty goals. Besides lacking the capacity to devise development schemes, citizens have not found the environment of LG officials conducive to their involvement in the development process. The domination of CCBs by contractors has been common, they have had problems completing projects and hardly more than a small proportion of them have succeeded in evoking participatory membership and led to the empowerment of their membership.

The PRSP have not been able to create any discernable mechanisms within the evolutionary framework to communicate its poverty commitments through

provincial and thereafter through local governments. Provincial governments are themselves considered to prefer cooperating with MPAs than LG officials and have apparently been resentful and punitive in their attitudes towards district governments, but local government concerns passed onto higher levels, including to the National Reconstruction Bureau, were not considered effectively addressed. The union councils in turn complain of being sidelined in local governments, often they do not get their share of allocated funds for development released by the district government, whereas their increased involvement in implementation of development schemes was vital to bring the process of development as close to the grassroots as possible.

Market based competition seemed like a good move to most of the local government officials interviewed in the four districts. Interestingly, it was a councilor from Khanpur tehsil in DG Khan who observed that the LG Ordinance needed more time to become more responsive, and that rapidly corporatizing local governments could weaken instead of strengthening them. The contract system was considered susceptible to corruption. But to the average citizenry, corporatization leading to reasonable prices was a better option than the high handedness of the bureaucrats monopolizing control over low quality social services.

There is no major impetus for poverty reduction in comparison to the publicity being given to it. It was suggested that in order to match the rhetorical emphasis, the higher authorities should provide clear directives, and even technical support from the Planning Department or other relevant departments, to implement PRSP specific schemes. District and tehsil officials specifically wanted to be given rights and responsibilities concerning the PRSP.

For identification of needs in a more participatory manner, LG officials wanted training at lower tiers of governance. It was felt that industrial sectors provide employment but can do much more if it promotes a rights based agenda for its workers. While new employment opportunities are evident, the remuneration provided is not enough to improve lives of poor families. Another suggestion for proactively addressing poverty was establishing productivity centers, where people could first learn and then be paid to produce items of need for our economic growth. It was suggested that instead of focusing on making things easier for big businesses, the PRSP should have tried to get social security cards issued for labourers to provide them access to a reliable social safety net.

With local government officials complaining about tensions within different tiers of government arising from implementation of clear-cut deputations, coordinating a national poverty reduction scheme still seems a tall order. The poverty reducing capacity of the devolutionary framework is therefore more of a rhetorical aspiration than reality at this stage.

V Conclusions

The research has brought forth interesting analysis of the ground impact of devolution from the perspective of its implementers. The aim of the research was to ascertain if devolution of power has provided support to an overarching, donor-driven development plan like the PRSP which in turn had considered the success of devolution as being vital for its own success.

Unfortunately, feedback obtained confirms that rent-seeking tendencies are being promoted on the one hand at the lower government levels, and that there is increasing consolidation of political power and patronage by the landed elite on the other, instead of the diffusion of power and the empowerment of the poor, which were the state goals of the PRSP and the evolution Plan.

Obtaining views of local citizens concerning both the Devolution Plan and the PRSP has however shed significant light on further research requirements, such as the need to provide training to local government officials on how to help address poverty alleviation within the LGO framework, in particular focusing on helping facilitate CCBs to offer a more more empowering experience for average citizens, instead of being preoccupied by the need to execute infrastructure schemes.

While the above findings are not be of statistical significance, they do have some replication value as they provide the basis for undertaking a more extensive and nuanced effort to try to capture and reflect more local government and citizens concerns in the attempt to enhance the effectiveness of poverty alleviation in the country.

Questions for LG officials

- How are you authorized to directly intervene in safeguarding the lives of people?
- Do local government officials interact with the initiatives of the Access to Justice Program? Do you have more support of the police in your area because of the Police Ordinance? Why? Why not?
- How has the promotion of private sector activities fared at the local level? What is its impact on the poor? Does outsourcing of services enhance service delivery? Are there alternatives to this trend?
- How do you feel about the TMA and district governments being able to act 'as a corporate body' under the LGO?
- Are the provincial governments playing an enabling role (by extending the needed technical and financial assistance) to the local governments for them to be able to work effectively?
- Are you providing assistance for institutional and administrative development, and above all, continued fiscal support to ensure that adequate resources are available for poverty reduction and social sector development at the local level?
- What should be done by the provincial governments to reorient their own role to become catalysts, facilitators, and technical advisors, while delegating responsibilities of formulation and implementation of development plans and projects to the local governments?
- Has the Provincial Poverty Reduction Strategy been able to create new mechanisms whereby provinces can communicate their poverty commitments, as articulated in their strategies, through local government service delivery? What has been your direct contribution to achieve the targeted PRSP outcomes?
- What are your comments on the LGO's provision of allowing local governments to act like corporate bodies which can assign or sublet any such function approved by the Zila/Tehsil Council and where there are no public objections? Are there any other feasible alternatives to this market based strategy?
- Has women's situation improved under the LB system?
- Has the position of minorities improved under the system?

Issues for FGDs with Citizens

- Are there rent-seeking on the one hand at the lower government levels and for consolidation of political power and patronage by the landed elite on the other? What can be done to address this problem?
- Is access to justice greater since devolution? How or why not?
- Is poverty reduction more evident since devolution? How or why not?
- Is social service delivery more effective since devolution? Why or why not?
- What role are CCB formations playing in the empowerment of communities and in improving the quality of life in your area? Do you have any suggestions to make CCBs more effective?