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## RECOVERING PAKISTAN

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## AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE

Pakistan's private relief agencies say they can do better

by Ambreen Ali

**T**he 7.6-magnitude earthquake hit northern Pakistan and Kashmir at 8:55 on the morning of October 8, 2005. Almost instantly, thousands of poorly designed buildings collapsed, causing massive landslides in the markets and burying schoolchildren under blocks of cement. In Balakot, the worst-hit city, over 50,000 people lay buried under the rubble. Many of those who survived were missing limbs and suffering from dehydration.

By nightfall, international non-governmental organizations had arrived to search the rubble for survivors. The Red Cross, Mercy Corps, Oxfam, Islamic Relief and others disseminated emergency supplies and temporary shelter and provided medical aid to the victims. They quickly mobilized their global networks to draw media attention to raise funds for tents, medicine and food. As time went by, the rescuers received a request for another item much in need in these Himalayan mountains slightly rearranged by the earthquake: white sheets. Unprepared for such large-scale death, Pakistan had run out of shrouds to bury the dead.

In the months that followed, the need for immediate relief was overshadowed by the necessity of finding sustainable, permanent solutions for the 3.3 million people rendered homeless by the natural disaster. Many families started relying on relief goods for sustenance; entire economies in the region had been

destroyed. Some victims found it easier to stay in the tents and receive rations than to seek employment. Slowly, organizations began to recognize that their presence was inadvertently handicapping the population.

Such unexpected consequences are inevitable in the work of international agencies. They are efficient in responding immediately to disasters and quickly mobilizing funds, but efficiency has its drawbacks. International agencies often apply the same relief models throughout the world, according to Adnan Sattar, a relief worker who has worked with UNICEF and the Pakistan-based Strengthening Participatory Organization. This cookie-cutter approach often ignores social nuances and situations unique to a region, he said.

This is where local organizations offer innovative and sustainable solutions for Pakistan's current crisis. Pakistan's local relief and development community has played a vital role for most of the nation's 59-year history and has created sustainable development solutions adapted by others around the world. Today, many international organizations, including UN agencies, rely on the expertise of these local organizations to execute long-term rehabilitation projects.

The Sungi Development Foundation, a rights-based community participatory organization working in the affected regions since 1989, operates projects funded by Oxfam and UNICEF. Pre-earthquake, Sungi focused on building

governance, social mobilization, education and health structures based on local community initiatives. Though Sungi is not a disaster relief organization, its staff is experienced with floods and other disasters.

When the earthquake struck, only Sungi had a complete list of all villages and populations in the remote parts of the mountainous region. International agencies worked from hubs in Mansehra and Muzaffarabad, large valley cities where many refugees had settled after their villages were destroyed. Sungi went to remote regions where, months after the earthquake, no organization had yet been.

In a recent critique of the UN agencies, ActionAid International charged that cultural insensitivities led to poor decisions, like providing joint kitchens when many families were hesitant to cook in front of others without having enough to share. Sungi's previous work in the region allowed their staff to anticipate such social nuances. They arranged their relief tent camps by clusters of villages, separating one village community from another to accommodate the tribe-centric culture.

"Community and social bonds are very important in this region. If we had thrown random communities together, the victims would have felt a lack of protection in their new surroundings," said Uzma Gul, Mansehra District zonal coordinator for Sungi. She added that Sungi workers had earned a level of trust



and friendship with the communities because of their past work in the region. They also stayed true to their rights-based approach by providing a public platform for housing and other concerns.

"Since October 8, we have been sitting under the sky," a local landowner said at a September press conference. "Give us the money our brothers across the world have sent us so that we can build a roof on our children's heads before the winter." Sungi helped disgruntled Balakot residents appeal to government offices and showed them how to fill out the forms.

Gul thinks Sungi and other local NGOs have the capacity to handle the earthquake rehabilitation effort without foreign presence. Further, she believes international non-governmental organizations should not play a role on the ground because they don't know the region or its people. Some international NGOs acknowledge the advantages for local groups working with local communities and have partnered with them. Others remain skeptical about local capacity to handle the disaster.

"Local values and culture have a stronger bearing on recovery planning and execution," said Usman Qazi, manager of a UN Development Programme transitional and housing project. But, he added, "There is still not enough local technical capacity to handle the complex phase of 'recovery.' The local NGOs are mostly development agencies with neither the mandated skills nor the technical resources for such a calamity. The international NGOs had systems at hand to respond to various relief needs."

The American Red Cross has found a healthy balance in this dilemma, according to Augustine Gill, the agency's senior field representative in this region. The American Red Cross works within the framework of the Red Cross/Crescent movement and its 185 member societies around the world to ensure local needs are met. The American Red Cross has been working here in partnership with the Pakistan Red Crescent Society.

As a result of this partnership American Red Cross has kept its overhead to nine percent, a figure Gill compares to the 60 percent overhead

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costs frequently charged by other international organizations.

The Citizens Foundation, a Karachi-based educational group known internationally for its financial transparency, has also relied on local talent to keep the foundation's administrative costs at five percent. Next year, the Citizens Foundation plans to build at least 1,500 low-cost,

"If we forget this earthquake, we are the ones who will suffer. We have learned so much from this disaster and we have to use that knowledge to build better structures for the future," said Iqbal. The Citizens Foundation will share its reconstruction technology for low-cost earthquake resistant homes in a training collaboration with Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority, a Pakistani government agency, and UN-HABITAT, the UN's human settlement program.

Collaborations have become central to the efforts in Pakistan. The United Nations held conferences with local organizations to minimize duplication, facilitate sharing of knowledge among non-governmental organizations and to highlight smaller initiatives, such as Strengthening Participatory Organization's efforts to serve the emotional needs of victims. After SPO's Adnan Sattar completed his own training in post-disaster trauma, he trained volunteers in Muzaffarab to treat the children suffering the emotional trauma of personal loss in the earthquake. The program has served more than 700 students in one year.

"After the earthquake, many of the children were scared to return to school," said Arzana Iqbal, another Strengthening Participatory Organization volunteer. "When we asked them to draw, they would make pictures of their tents and surroundings. Then we could use those pictures as a way to discuss their emotions and fears."

SPO started in the early 1990s as a semi-governmental development organization. Today it is an independent capacity-building organization focusing on social, economic and cultural rights. It is present in 68 districts in Pakistan and is the largest rights-based organization in the country. What sets SPO apart is a strong focus on including government in its efforts through advocacy and

policy recommendations.

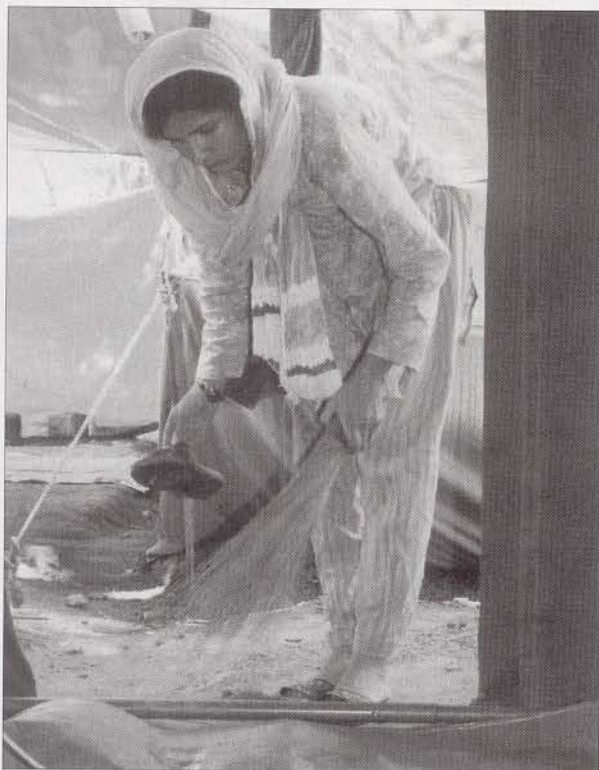
SPO focuses heavily on lobbying for policy changes based on lessons learned from its work. Such advocacy work can only be done by local NGOs; as outsiders, international organizations cannot demand changes in local government policies, though they are sometimes freer from local influence and can provide necessary criticism.

Following the earthquake, local organizations addressed post-earthquake needs with innovation and prudence. They have been limited in the scope of their influence, however, and opportunities to create large-scale change have been missed. A year later, Oxfam reports that 83 percent of victims lack permanent shelter and 66,000 are facing the upcoming Himalayan winter in tents and temporary shelter. But despite the frustrations about lack of housing and economic opportunity, there is progress and reason to be hopeful.

Today, there are more non-profits and funds available in a region largely ignored prior to the earthquake. Medicine, education and basic water and sanitation are improving in ways unimaginable before the disaster. Victims are demanding their rights, organizations are advocating for policy changes and the government is actually listening. Estimates for how long the recovery process will take are vague, though most international NGOs plan to leave the area in the next five years. The World Bank recently provided a timeline of eight years for the completion of earthquake-related efforts, but even that is optimistic, says Gill of the American Red Cross.

International NGOs have improved conditions here and were instrumental in the initial relief phase of Pakistan's earthquake efforts when the country lacked such resources. By empowering local organizations, the international community ensures that be strengthened economically, politically and socially long after they have left.

*Ambreen Ali is the editor of Responsive Philanthropy and a McCormick Tribune Fellow at the Northwestern University Medill School of Journalism. This was her fourth trip to Pakistan, her parents' home.*



Camplife continues for many in Muzaffarabad

earthquake-resistant homes. The foundation provides materials for the homes but wants the prospective owner to shoulder some of the costs. "Some of the victims have become used to receiving aid," says Saeed Iqbal, a field coordinator for The Citizens Foundation. "We don't want them to think the house is free. So we are asking them to pay for the transportation of the materials. That way, they have invested in the house and can feel that they truly own it."

The foundation's role is limited to a handful of villages and rebuilding in only a part of each village. But by training local landlords, construction workers and women on the building technology, The Citizens Foundation is ensuring that knowledge of the technology is available for generations.