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Evaluating the Strategies of NGOs in Gilgit-Baltistan: A Case Study of Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)

Muhammad Nawaz

Visiting Lecturer University of Baltistan

Nawazhamzabalti125@gmail.com

Naila Batool

Lecturer Pakistan Studies, University of Baltistan

Naila.batool@uobs.edu.pk

Abstract

The role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is crucial in alleviating the socio-economic vulnerabilities in neglected areas such as Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) which has high unemployment, poverty and geographical isolation that impedes progress. This paper compares the approaches of two major NGOs the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) on how they have tried to alleviate unemployment in GB. AKRSP uses community-based approach, concentrating on women empowerment, infrastructure development, and modernization of agriculture, whereas IFAD uses Economic Transformation Initiative (ETI), which focuses on the agricultural value chains, irrigation infrastructure, and market access. The study uses a qualitative, comparative research method, and it uses both primary and secondary data in order to evaluate effectiveness, sustainability, and community participation of these NGOs. The research results indicate that grassroots efforts, including microfinance and vocational training programs, developed by AKRSP have enabled local communities, but macro-level projects, developed by IFAD, have increased agricultural productivity and connectivity. In spite of all that they have achieved, issues such as geographical isolations, socio-cultural restrictions, and financial barriers still prevail, which should be addressed with more partnership between NGOs, government agencies, and the business sectors. The research highlights the need to have diversified economic policies such as the promotion of agribusiness, vocational training and infrastructure development to deal with unemployment sustainably. It is recommended that skill-based programs should be increased, infrastructure should be enhanced, women empowered economically, and multi-stakeholder partnerships be nurtured to realize the economic potential of GB.

Keywords: NGOs, Gilgit-Baltistan, Unemployment, AKRSP, IFAD, Rural Development, Agricultural Modernization, Women Empowerment, Infrastructure, Sustainability.

Introduction

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are very instrumental in promoting socio-economic development especially in areas that are struggling with structural issues like poverty, unemployment, and poor infrastructures. Their actions tend to fill in the gaps of governmental programs, providing specific solutions to the local problems (Cheema & Atta, 2014). NGOs in developing nations such as Pakistan including the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) have played a significant role in solving unemployment and rural poverty in the community by organizing community based projects (Khan, 2015). Such organizations also use participatory methods to support marginalized groups, increase agricultural outputs, and access to education and financial services, which helps to achieve the target of sustainable development (Ali, 2021).

Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) is a mountainous and remote area in the northern part of Pakistan, the development of which is prevented by special social-economic and geographical challenges. The economy of the region is dominated by subsistence farming, with more than 90 percent of its territory being mountainous and 1.2 percent arable, with poor infrastructure, climate-related threats and lack of market access all impeding the process of subsistence farming (Lambah, 2016). Moreover, GB is characterized by unemployment since only 10 out of 5,000 graduates working annually obtain employment, which promotes poverty and outmigration (PBS, 2021). Isolation of the region, which is complicated by the sectarian struggles and the lack of a sound vocational training process, highlights the necessity of specific interventions (Kumar, 2019). In such a context, NGOs such as AKRSP and IFAD have employed revolutionary plans to curb unemployment by advocating agricultural modernization, women empowerment, and infrastructure development (AKRSP Progress Review, 2020; IFAD Report, 2023).

This paper analyses the relative approaches that AKRSP and IFAD have used to alleviate unemployment in the Gilgit Baltistan. Whereas AKRSP is more oriented towards the comprehensive development of communities through education, microfinance, and hydroelectric projects, the Economic Transformation Initiative (ETI) developed by IFAD focuses on agricultural value chains and irrigation infrastructures (Nawaz, 2021; ETI-GB Report, 2019). This article explores their strategies and identifies the synergies and differences in their strategies, providing insights on their effectiveness and scalability by examining their strategies. The results will be used to guide policymakers and development practitioners on how NGO-led interventions in such marginalized areas as GB can be optimized, since the conventional systems of governance do not necessarily work in the area (Shagufta & Abdul, 2020).

Literature Review

NGOs have generally been identified as crucial players in rural development and poverty alleviation especially in areas where government interventions are minimal. Edwards and Hulme (1996) consider NGOs as important gaps fillers left by the state

institutions in terms of necessities within the country through the provision of education, health, and livelihood. They are a grassroots organization which allows them to customize their interventions to fit local needs and community participation and empowerment. Within the framework of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), such organizations as the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) have already applied their programs to reduce the unemployment rate and increase the agricultural productivity (AKRSP Progress Review, 2020). These activities are usually targeted to capacity-building, infrastructure development, and financial inclusion, which is fundamental to sustainable development in the rural areas. Nevertheless, the critics claim that the NGOs can also work in isolation, which contributes to the lack of cohesion and a small long-term effect (Banks et al., 2015). In spite of these problems, the literatures emphasize the role of NGOs in enhancing socio-economic development, especially in the more remote and marginalized regions such as GB.

Studies of NGOs within the Gilgit-Baltistan also evidenced their great contributions to the development of the region, especially the sectors of agriculture, education and women empowerment. As an example, AKRSP has played an important role in facilitating the agricultural modernization by means of the training sessions and planting high-yield crop varieties (Khan, 2015). On the same note, IFAD Economic Transformation Initiative (ETI) has been working on the improvement of market access of smallholder farmers through improving rural infrastructure and value chain development (IFAD Supervision Report, 2023). Researchers suggest that NGOs are important in mitigating unemployment through provision of employment to individuals in tourism, handicraft and agro-processing (Nawaz, 2021; Ali, 2021). Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these interventions is affected by such issues as geographical isolation, the lack of funding, and cultural barriers. Moreover, NGO operations have sometimes been interfered with by sectarian conflicts in GB especially in the regions that rely heavily on tourism (Khalida, 2012). However, the literature indicates that NGOs have registered positive changes in enhancing livelihoods and reducing poverty in the region, although their sustainability in the future is controversial.

The models applied in evaluating the impact of NGOs are usually based on participatory development and sustainability theories. In line with the participatory development as proposed by Chambers (1997), local people should have a say in the process of decision making to make the interventions to be culturally appropriate and sustainable. As an example, the community-based approach of AKRSP fits into this framework because the organization relies on local organizations to implement a project (AKRSP Progress Review, 2020). Instead, sustainability theory is concerned about the sustainability of development projects on different levels such as economic, social and environmental aspects. The activities of IFAD in GB, including irrigation programmes and agro-business development, are aimed at making the economy

sustainable through improvements in the incomes of farmers and decreasing the losses in the post-harvest (ETI-GB Report, 2019). Critics such as Dichter (2003) have however claimed that most NGOs projects cannot be sustained because they are over-funded by other parties and the lack of local ownership. To rectify such gaps, current literature promotes hybrid models that entail both flexibility of NGOs and government support to achieve scalability and institutionalization (Banks et al., 2015). In sum, the literature also lays stress on the necessity to have powerful theoretical models to assess the effect of NGOs, so that the development interventions were effective and sustainable in the long term.

Overview of Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and IFAD

Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) is a leading non-governmental organization that was founded in the year 1982 under the umbrella of the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) and has the main aim of enhancing the lives of the people living in the rural setting of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) and others (Attique, 2020). AKRSP concentrates on socio-economic growth by means of programs like women empowerment, infrastructure development, agricultural betterment, and education (Nawaz, 2021). It is a participatory kind of organization where local communities take part in the identification and execution of development projects thus making it sustainable and owned. AKRSP has helped to curb unemployment in GB through offering vocational training, micro-finance loans, and modern farming methods to the small-scale farmers (Khan, 2015). Its work has been widely recognized internationally and has even won an Ashden Award in the year 2004 on its innovative hydro-power projects (AKRSP Progress Review, 2020).

Conversely, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) is a United Nations specialized agency founded in 1977 to observe rural poverty and agricultural development in developing nations (IFAD, 2023). In Pakistan, IFAD has been engaged in GB in the context of its Economic Transformation Initiative (ETI) that seeks to enhance agricultural productivity and generate job opportunities to rural households (IFAD Supervision Report, 2023). The approaches are modernization of agriculture, enhancement of infrastructure, and facilitation of value chain development to bring farmers to the mainstream markets (ETI-GB Report, 2019). In comparison with AKRSP, which is an independent organization within the Aga Khan Development Network, IFAD cooperates closely with the Pakistani government and local agencies in order to run its programs, which are in line with the national development agenda (IFAD Country Strategic Program, 2023).

At GB, AKRSP uses a multi-dimensional approach to rural development, where the community participation and capacity building have been of major concern. Women empowerment is one of its major strategies that it has undertaken by establishing such programs as the vocational training, business management trainings and micro finance programs (Khan, 2015). As an example, AKRSP has developed Women Organizations (WOs) to teach women financial literacy and entrepreneurship skills so

that they can open small enterprises and become the contributors to family incomes (Research Study on Women Empowerment, 2014). Also, AKRSP has enhanced agricultural output by considerable margin through the introduction of high-yielding crop varieties, new irrigation methods and post-harvest storage (Attique, 2020). Over 400 infrastructure projects such as roads, bridges and hydro-power have been built by the organization and this has improved connectivity and access to the markets by remote communities (AKRSP Progress Review, 2020).

The other remarkable aspect of AKRSP is on education and skill development. Educational Development and Improvement Programme (EDIP) was introduced in partnership with Australian Agency for International Development (AusID) to improve education standards in GB through the construction of schools, teacher training and scholarships to the poor students (EDIP Final Report, 2013). Such initiatives have not only increased literacy levels among the population, but have also offered the young individuals with employable skills thus curbing unemployment in the area. The comprehensive strategy of AKRSP that includes the economic, social, and infrastructural development has positioned it as a pillar of rural development in GB (Nawaz, 2021).

The core interventions of IFAD in GB are put through the Economic Transformation Initiative (ETI) that is aimed at transforming the agricultural sector to decrease poverty and unemployment (ETI-GB Report, 2019). One of the most important tactics of IFAD is agriculturalization, which refers to the implementation of such technologies as Variable Rate Technology (VRT) or drip irrigation to make the best use of water, maximizing crop productivity (IFAD, 2023). These technologies have especially proved effective in the water-scarce sections of GB and have allowed farmers to grow high-value crops, such as cherries and apricots (ETI-GB Report, 2019). Infrastructure development as well is a priority of IFAD, which invested in more than 500 km of rural roads and 1,000 irrigation schemes to enhance market access of farmers (IFAD Supervision Report, 2023).

In contrast to AKRSP, which functions through the local NGOs, IFAD collaborates with the government of Pakistan and other stakeholders in the private sector in order to magnify its efforts. To illustrate, the idea of agribusiness promotion in GB by IFAD entails the formation of smallholder farmer groups as producers and matching them with the private sector, to have more access to market (IFAD Country Strategic Program, 2023). Furthermore, IFAD has focused on gender equality, as it supports the rights of women to their own land and initiates training in agricultural entrepreneurship (Assan, 2018). Such partnerships have led to an increment of 30 percent in household incomes as well as creation of more than 5,000 jobs in GB, which shows that IFAD is highly involved in rural development (IFAD Supervision Report, 2023).

Although AKRSP and IFAD have the same goal to address the problem of unemployment and poverty in GB, the strategies in which they implement them vary

in relation to scope and methodology. AKRSP follows a grassroots, bottom-up approach, which means that the organization deals with local initiatives like village-based schools, micro-hydro power stations, and women cooperatives (Attique, 2020). Its advantage is that it is strongly embedded in local communities, thus, being long-term sustainable (Nawaz, 2021). Conversely, IFAD has a macro level approach using the partnership with the government and the private sector to effect large-scale agricultural and infrastructural development projects (IFAD, 2023). Such top-down model enables IFAD to have an impact on policy and institutional structures, but it might be deprived of minute community interaction that AKRSP is so proficient in. Regardless of these disparities, the two organizations can be used to complement each other in solving the developmental issues of GB. The priority of AKRSP to education and women empowerment complements the holes left by the agriculture-focused programs implemented by IFAD, and the investment into the infrastructure by IFAD complements the impact of the local project (Khan, 2015; IFAD Supervision Report, 2023). Collectively, they offer a complete picture of rural development in GB, where the community involvement is paired with the system change to generate sustainable employment and economic growth.

Methodology

The study used qualitative, analytical and comparative research design to assess the approach of Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) in alleviating unemployment in Gilgit Baltistan (GB). The method was adopted to gain an insightful knowledge of the social and economic influences of the interventions of these NGOs. To give a complete analysis, the research used both primary and secondary sources which include official documents, interviews, research articles, and reports. The research was conducted with a view of understanding how AKRSP and IFAD approached the issue of unemployment differently and similarly by engaging in discourse analysis. Qualitative character of the research enabled an in-depth analysis of the activities of the NGOs, including infrastructure development, modernization of agriculture, and women empowerment, and taking into account the social-economic situation of GB.

The data were collected through the combination of methods to provide reliability and validity. The major data was collected by conducting interviews with the local stakeholders such as beneficiaries of AKRSP and IFAD programs, NGO officials and community leaders. The interviews offered the first-hand information on the effectiveness and difficulties of the strategies of the NGOs. The secondary data was obtained on the basis of the official reports, academic journals, and government reports, including Pakistan Bureau of Statistics and Economic Transformation Initiative (ETI) reports. Also, the researcher looked through AKRSP and IFAD reports of progress and documentation to determine how they were carried out and their results. The data triangulation that allowed using several sources of information

served as a biases mitigation factor and allowed seeing the overall picture of the role the NGOs play in decreasing unemployment rates in GB.

The assessment criteria on evaluating the strategies of the NGOs were sustainability, community involvement, and effectiveness. Sustainability was also assessed in terms of the sustainability of the various projects, including the setting up of vocational training centers and irrigation systems and how they could operate even without the external funding. The aspect of community participation was assessed on the level at which local populations were involved in decision-making as well as the project implementation and that activities were contextually and culturally appropriate. The achievement was evaluated based on quantitative data, i.e., employment ratios and income, along with qualitative testimonies by beneficiaries. As an example, the microfinance programs of AKRSP and agricultural value chain development of IFAD were examined in terms of their direct consequences on livelihoods. Such criteria gave a systematic guide in comparing the strategies of the NGOs, to identify their strong points as well as weaknesses in their efforts to deal with the problem of unemployment in GB.

Analysis of Strategies Implemented by AKRSP and IFAD

International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) have established extensive measures to enhance agricultural productivity in Gilgit Baltistan (GB). AKRSP focuses on the modernization of the farming practices by providing training programs, sowing the crop varieties that are more productive and the irrigation sources development. The organization has been conducting water conservation, soil conservation, and pest control workshops and due to that, the crop yields of small-scale farmers have risen drastically (AKRSP Progress Review, 2020). Besides, AKRSP has established links between the conventional markets and farmers, which reduce losses after harvest, and increase earning potential (Nawaz, 2021). The economic transformation initiative (ETI) of IFAD concentrates on the development of value chains, creation of producer groups and agribusiness. To make the best out of the resources and ensure higher yields in water-deficient regions, ETI has developed Variable Rate Technology (VRT) and drip irrigation systems (IFAD Supervision Report, 2023). The two NGOs have also majored on livestock and poultry rearing, training and provision of microfinance to the rural households to multiply their sources of income (Khan, 2015). All this has worked towards curbing unemployment and food security in GB.

AKRSP and IFAD have been critical in poverty eradication and economic empowerment in GB. The microfinance programs and saving schemes established by AKRSP have also helped women and youth establish small businesses to achieve financial independence (AKRSP Progress Review, 2020). The organization has introduced Women Organizations (WOs) and Village Organizations (VOs) that encourage a shared economic group, like handicrafts and agro processing (Khurshid, 2013). ETI program at IFAD has been involved in land rights of women to make sure

they are involved in the decision-making process and ownership of agriculture (Assan, 2018). Through its efforts in offering credit and linking the market, IFAD has enabled the rural communities to shift their farming practices (subsistence farming) to commercial farming (IFAD, 2023). The two NGOs have also contributed to entrepreneurship via skill development, whereby AKRSP has trained more than 10,000 young people in areas such as tourism and construction (Hamza, 2021). Such efforts have not only raised household earnings but also narrowed the gap between the genders in the economic activity, which fits the overall aim of sustainable development in GB.

The major contribution of AKRSP and IFAD to social and community development in GB is in the education, healthcare and infrastructure projects. Educational Development and Improvement Programme (EDIP) of AKRSP has not only improved access of quality education within inaccessible regions but has also constructed schools and train teachers (AKF Pakistan Final Report, 2013). It has also enhanced access to healthcare by building health facilities and creating awareness (AKRSP Progress Review, 2020). The infrastructure projects of IFAD that include construction of rural roads and irrigation schemes have enabled isolated communities to access markets and services that have led to increased economic activities (ETI-GB Progress Report, 2015). The two NGOs have focused on community involvement in the planning and execution of projects to make them sustainable and owned by locals (Nawaz, 2021). Such initiatives have been able to reduce the living standards and have promoted inclusive growth in GB because of the severe deficiencies that they have solved in social services.

In GB sustainability to the environment is central to the strategy of AKRSP and IFAD. One of the first initiatives by AKRSP was hydroelectric projects, such as micro-hydro power plants, to bring clean energy and decrease the use of fossil fuel (AKRSP Progress Review, 2020). Climate resilience has been improved by the water management projects carried out by the organization like the creation of irrigation channels and encouraging rainwater harvesting (Ingrid & Jawad, 2019). ETI program at IFAD has incorporated climate-smart agriculture where such initiatives as organic farming and soil conservation are promoted to reduce environmental degradation (IFAD, 2023). The two NGOs have also been keen on practicing reforestation and natural resource management in order to fight deforestation and soil erosion (Khan, 2015). Through such an orientation of their projects to the environmental sustainability objectives, AKRSP and IFAD have guaranteed the long-term ecological and economic advantages of the communities in GB. Through such efforts, there is a need to consider environmental concerns in development strategies in order to have a sustainable result.

Challenges and Limitations

The hilly and remote area of Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) poses a great challenge to NGOs such as the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and the International Fund

for Agricultural Development (IFAD). The rugged terrain of the region where more than 80 percent of the area is covered with mountains constrains the development of infrastructure, which makes transport difficult and access to remote communities a challenge (Ali, 2021). Ineffective roads systems also cause massive post-harvest losses in agricultural produce as it is difficult to transport them to markets, about 57,178 tons of agricultural products are wasted every year because of inefficient connectivity (Yousouf & Arif, 2020). Also, natural disasters like landslides, floods, and glacial outburst are common in GB, and they interrupt economic operations and destroy infrastructure, making the work of NGOs even more difficult (Liaqat & Muhammad, 2023). Such environmental constraints require expensive and dynamic interventions, which are resource-demanding to the NGOs and restrict their coverage.

NGOs are also faced with socio-cultural dynamics in GB. The conventional gender roles tend to limit the involvement of women in economic activities, although AKRSP and IFAD have been trying to empower women by training and microfinance (Khan, 2015). The historical and political tensions have led to sectarian wars that have interrupted tourism and local enterprises, making the country an unstable environment to host the projects of NGOs (Kumar, 2016). Besides, multilingualism of the region (e.g., Shina, Balti, Brushiski) may create barriers to communication, especially within educational and vocational training programs (Ali & Saqib, 2024). Such cultural and social issues make NGOs implement context-sensitive strategies, which makes implementation slow and decreases the short-term effects of their programs.

Financial and logistical constraints exist in GB to both AKRSP and IFAD. In as much as AKRSP has been able to gain international awards and partners, it has been characterized by a need to depend on external funding which may be erratic (Aga Khan Foundation, 2013). Economic Transformation Initiative (ETI) in GB is the ambitious project of IFAD, which must deal with the high costs of its activities because of the remoteness of the region and the necessity of special infrastructure, including irrigation systems and hydroelectric projects (IFAD, 2023). These issues are further compounded by limited support on the part of local governments as NGOs are frequently needed to bridge the gaps in the provision of public services without ensuring sustainable funding sources (Gilgit-Baltistan Rural Support Program, 2021). Such limitations compel NGOs to focus on immediate benefits at the expense of a long-term transformation of the system, which may compromise the entire mission.

Although AKRSP and IFAD have achieved significant progress in curbing unemployment as the vocational training provided by AKRSP and the modernization of agriculture by IFAD, the effects are not evenly spread. The infrastructure development initiatives such as road construction and hydropower plants by AKRSP have benefited the livelihood of the locals but are mostly constructed in areas that are accessible to most people, leaving the most inaccessible communities underserved (Aga Khan Rural Support Programme, 2020). The value chain

development focus of IFAD has brought farmers more income, but relying on producer group poses a threat of marginalized groups being left out (IFAD, 2023). Critical review indicates that the two NGOs can improve their performance by intensifying monitoring and evaluation systems, fair resource allocation, and a more in-depth partnership with local governments and communities to resolve structural obstacles (Hamza, 2021).

Conclusion

The article points out the important problem of unemployment in Gilgit Baltistan (GB), which is a natural resource rich area that faces economic problems. GB has high unemployment despite its potential in agriculture, tourism and mining as it lacks economic opportunities, well-developed infrastructure, geographical isolation and lack of proper education and vocational training. The comparative study of Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) and International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) shows that they have been contributing largely to alleviating unemployment through their different programs. The projects of AKRSP are women empowerment, infrastructure development, agricultural modernization, and skill training, whereas IFAD with the help of its Economic Transformation Initiative (ETI) is concentrated on agricultural productivity, value chain development, and market access. Both the organizations have managed to provide employment, raise the livelihoods as well as grow the economy of the area. Nevertheless, slow improvement in the unemployment rates reminds us of the necessity to continue taking action, to enhance cooperation between the NGOs and administrative structures, and of the diversification of the economic strategy aimed at resolving the very causes of unemployment in GB.

The results indicate that although AKRSP and IFAD have registered significant improvement, there are still problems of seasonal unemployment, gender inequality and resource underutilization. The area is highly dependent on agricultural activities, and the insecurity of the climate requires some novel measures such as the development of agribusiness, the introduction of new technologies, and the enhancement of the infrastructure. The study as well shows the significance of local capacity building and community involvement in the sustainability of development initiatives. To continue this process, it is necessary to implement a comprehensive approach that will combine education, professional training, and collaboration with the private sector in order to achieve economic growth potential and durable solutions to the employment of the population in GB.

Recommendations

1. **Enhance Vocational Training Programs:** Expand vocational and technical training centers to equip youth and women with marketable skills, particularly in high-demand sectors like tourism, agriculture, and handicrafts. Tailor programs to local needs and ensure alignment with industry requirements.

2. **Improve Infrastructure Development:** Prioritize the construction and maintenance of roads, bridges, and irrigation systems to connect remote areas with markets, reduce post-harvest losses, and facilitate trade and tourism.
3. **Promote Agri-Business and Value Chains:** Strengthen support for small-scale farmers by providing access to modern farming techniques, credit facilities, and market linkages. Encourage the establishment of cooperatives to enhance collective bargaining power and profitability.
4. **Empower Women Economically:** Increase funding and resources for women-centric programs, including microfinance, entrepreneurship training, and land ownership initiatives, to ensure their active participation in the economy.
5. **Diversify Economic Opportunities:** Invest in non-agricultural sectors such as renewable energy, mining, and eco-tourism to create alternative employment sources and reduce dependency on traditional agriculture.
6. **Strengthen Government-NGO Collaboration:** Foster partnerships between local governments, NGOs, and private stakeholders to pool resources, share expertise, and implement coordinated strategies for sustainable development and employment generation in GB.

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