

The Pakistan conundrum

When I left Pakistan in autumn 1999 to attend LSE for a master's degree, the country was still under a civilian government. When I returned in autumn 2000, it was to a country under martial law, writes **Themrise Khan**.



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I still remember the news of the coup being whispered among my Pakistani classmates, during Professor Teddy Brett's development management seminar. Over the next decade, Pakistan witnessed a military dictatorship, a devastating earthquake, rising religious extremism and violent militancy, a return to democracy, and a failing economy. Added to this, is now the worst natural disaster on record for the country and perhaps even globally – nationwide flooding that has affected over 20 million people and submerged a fifth of the country's total land mass, decimating its agriculture and livestock.

As a social development professional, and a Pakistani citizen, this maddening descent into chaos has been painful to witness, and almost impossible to respond to as an individual. No amount of graduate studies or even work experience can prepare you for the onslaught of a nation imploding, especially if it is your own.

Having worked with under-privileged communities and multi and bi-lateral agencies for almost 15 years to 'end poverty' and 'empower the poor', it seems that all such attempts have remained futile. Pakistan's poor remain poor and even more helpless than they were a decade ago. The World Bank currently estimates that

almost 63 million or a third of the population are still below the poverty line. This is despite the fact that billions have been poured into development aid in Pakistan by international agencies. Pakistan's Development Assistance Database shows a total contribution of US\$23.8 billion in development aid to Pakistan as of March 2008.

Debates in LSE's Development Studies Institute (DESTIN) focused on development aid being only a part of the answer to human development. But as time has worn on, many now see ineffective international aid as a real problem, sucking countries deeper into debt and poverty.

The explosive rise in militant terrorism and the global 'war on terror', in which Pakistan plays an important part, has subsequently turned the development agenda on its head. International aid to Pakistan is now led by the US with a US\$7.5 billion aid package to counter terrorism and counterinsurgency. The UK is following the lead by doubling its aid contribution to £480 million over five years. Suddenly, it is not development for progress anymore, it is development for politics.

As a practising development professional, the sheer immensity of this aid is perplexing for two reasons; first,

the amount is entering the country on the pretext of solving a greater (geo-political) ill, rather than focusing on human development as a direct need. Second, because of its sheer monetary enormity, no one knows how to utilise this aid. The government lacks capacity and human resources. Civil society, though well intentioned, lacks the professionalism to be able to respond efficiently enough. As a result, international donors, to justify their presence and tax-payers contributions, myopically hand over millions in debt-swaps and budget support and then silently step back and watch it disappear into oblivion.

Humanitarian aid is no different. The October 2005 earthquake saw approximately US\$5.93 billion (25 per cent of total international commitments) committed by international agencies for relief and reconstruction. But much of that aid still hasn't reached Pakistan, let alone been used for its intended purpose. A similar fate awaits those affected by the current flood disaster. Almost \$1 billion has been pledged by the international community so far. But given past experience, the utilisation of this aid is once again under serious question. The responsibility of the international community to hold Pakistan accountable for such use, meanwhile, is reflected by its own silence on the issue and by claiming that Pakistan suffers from an 'image deficit' due to its involvement in militant terrorism. A double-edged sword if there was any.

This is the harsh reality of international development studies, where academic study and reality are often poles apart. But the benefit of such study, as I learnt at my year at LSE, is that one is able to challenge the realities one eventually faces. The constant debates with my peers and other students, in the international environment of the LSE campus, made it possible for me to contextualise and address issues in a more global perspective, rather than in isolation. It has led to the ultimate realisation, several years later, that perhaps it is time for development practitioners to come up with a new form of development. In the conundrum that is Pakistan, the question is, where and how to begin. ■



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