

## ***Book Review***

**S. Akbar Zaidi**, *Transforming Urban Settlements, The Orangi Pilot Project's Low-Cost Sanitation Model*, City Press, Karachi, 2000, Price: Pak Rs. 225/-.

This book is the story of the formulation and implementation of the Orangi Pilot Project's Sanitation Model, and it is told with clarity and intelligence. Indeed, in this age of self-seeking and egoism, indifference and callousness, it is heartening to note that at least some amongst us somewhere still show a modicum of concern for the marginalised and less privileged in our societies. It is ample indication of the author's empathy and identification with the human condition in its entirety.

The book in fact is a reduced version of a study by the author submitted to Water Aid, UK, one of the United Kingdom's leading charities. Orangi is a success story essentially, building its low cost sanitation programme in one of the biggest informal settlements in Karachi. An in depth study of the project, its nature, philosophy and methodology is provided by the author followed by a critical appraisal of the NGO sector in Pakistan and why this sector has not been able to replicate the model. The book also dispels certain myths and false conceptions about the Project, propagated in the main by the NGOs and donors. The brunt of the author's criticism of the NGO sector is, to put it succinctly, that NGOs could only play an effective role if they were to 'overcome some of their main weaknesses arising out of their dependence on donors and their organisational culture.'

Ch 2 is based on field visits made by the author to the area and discussions held with members of the community. There are revealing insights included here and the sensitivity of the author is evident. The observations are decidedly not that of a superficial observer, divorced from the reality on the ground, a drawback this methodology can often entail. Zaidi identifies strongly with the people and their problems. Initially, he looks at the impact of OPP at different levels, on health, income levels and social capital. What appears to be a foregone conclusion, the removal of waste water would generally have a positive impact on the health of the residents, but as the author points out owing to other unhealthy practices of the inhabitants it was not possible to quantify this improvement. Improvements in, income were more or less evident, however.

The writer next expostulates on the nature, philosophy and methodology of the model, in essence these being the very reasons for its success. He emphasises the fact that OPP is by no means a traditional NGO. It is distinct from other mainstream NGOs in that it is not particularly 'concerned with achieving specific targets set by donors or by itself. It believes in dealing first with what the community perceives to be a priority problem before tackling other matters. It is in no way a construction agency, physically undertaking projects itself. It is for the residents themselves to take up the task of laying sewer lines, with OPP offering social and technical guidance. The OPP also sees itself as a motivator and believes in mobilising the community. For that matter, the OPP no longer needs to play a motivating role as it did previously, since owing to the demonstration effect, people come forth and seek advice from the OPP.

The author talks about the individual without whom OPP may not ever have been possible at all - Dr. Akhtar Hameed Khan. The organisational culture of the project is in close harmony with the personality of this exceptional individual, states the writer. Dr. Khan's lifestyle was frugal and austere and likewise the very principles according to which the organisation is run. And this despite the fact that Dr. Khan was a much misunderstood personality, according to the author.

Having eulogised the extraordinary success of the OPP model, Zaidi explains at length why it has been problematic to replicate the model elsewhere and cites examples of other instances to do so. The model is difficult to replicate, as the author categorically states at the outset. The terrain, for one needs to have a gradient as in Orangi for in a place with a flatter terrain, pumping of sewage would be required as well. Also, OPP only enters a community which seeks its help and for this conditions are placed, the most stringent of which is that of self reliance and freedom from dependence on donors. This is something the NGO community is far removed from for one.

Zaidi then cites other set ups which have for better or for worse attempted to replicate the model, and he writes at length about the fate of such instances. He concludes that in order to 'replicate' certain principles need to be followed rather than merely imposing the model on each and every setting, a rather simplistic and obvious conclusion to say the least.

The future directions of OPP are then discussed and then the wider impact of OPP in the country. An interesting chapter follows, whereby the author attempts to disclaim the host of criticisms which abound around the

reputation of OPP. He talks about their key arguments and the validity of their claims, giving a fair appraisal in the process.

Zaidi concludes his book with what is in essence a repetition of that which has come earlier, and perhaps this is where one of the weaknesses of the book lies. His suggestions at the end in terms of remedial measures are also somewhat lacking. He could have elaborated on them, even though that is easier said than done.

All told, it is apparent that the author is a fairly seasoned writer, this being the fifth of his major works. The book is concise and although at times somewhat repetitive, nowhere does he belabour the point. Rather, the author goes for the jugular. Zaidi seems to be brimming with enthusiasm, something that wears off on the absorbed reader.

Inexpensive in cost and hence affordable by most, perhaps the book deserved better production. It is undoubtedly an eye opener and extremely readable despite what some would balk at as being a 'mundane' and 'remote' issue.

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