

# The Library Challenge

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## Introduction

In project planning for community participation, the extent to which participation is likely or possible is always in question. What is reasonable to expect? To what extent and in what forms might people be interested to contribute, whether in tangible or intangible ways? Answers to those questions emerge over time and depend on many factors, the strongest of which may be trust, inspiration, motivation, and leadership. At first in PERRP, local people were reluctant to be involved, but in a short time that changed dramatically through local leadership and different sources of motivation. Sometimes each community contributed far in excess of what was imagined, as was the case with the Library Challenge.

## The Library Challenge

Something remarkable happened about midway through PERRP: there was an event and process that brought all aspects of the project together. It was called the Library Challenge. Of all that occurred in the project, this challenge was probably a favorite memory for many people and was a textbook case of empowerment.

In the first two or three years of the project, the social team began to discuss the prospect of libraries for the new schools. Before the quake, none of the government schools had libraries or books because, in Pakistan, these are considered luxuries when education budgets are limited. But now, with the new building standards, all PERRP school designs included a dedicated library room that would be fully furnished. Without books, would these new facilities remain empty and unused? And wouldn't that be a pity? The debate about books carried on for months among social team members. Some of the mobilizers thought it would be a big waste of time and money to get books. They came from the same area where the schools were being built and said there was no culture

of reading in the region. They were concerned that books would not be appreciated or looked after, or that the teachers would lock any library books in the cupboards. Others felt that stocking the library might be worthwhile.

All members of the social team had gone through the same government school system; knowing it all too well, they were divided in their opinions. In AJ&K, the literacy rate is 76 percent, as compared to 60 percent for other parts of Pakistan (Government of AJ&K 2018). Even with the highest literacy rate in Pakistan, there still was doubt about local interest in school libraries. The debate continued inside the social team: What do we mean by reading culture? Why don't schools have libraries already? Since there's practically no TV or Internet in these far-flung areas, what do kids do in their spare time? Do adults read? The *aha!* moment came one day when someone asked, "So why do you think people don't read here?" The answer decided the whole argument: "Because there's practically nothing to read! People are poor, they don't have books or anything else to read at home." If there is nothing to read, how can there be a reading culture? As one committee chairman later put it,

I like reading, but before this, nobody was aware of the importance of school libraries. With the books our community has donated now, along with those from the Library Challenge project, we will have a great collection even in this remote village.

By three years into the project, about half the construction was completed or underway. All the committees had been active for much of that time. With facilitation by the social team, the committees had already made significant achievements and were busy fulfilling their duties with the project. By this time the project's protocols, routines, and committees were working relatively smoothly, to the point that the committees seemed to be ready for more.

Discussion had continued all along inside the social team and senior management about getting books. We would need an enormous number of books for the project's seventeen thousand students. How would we do it? What were the options? There was some thought about getting the CDM Smith head office in the USA involved to donate books, but that idea was nixed when it was realized that shipping costs would be exorbitant; that those books would all be only in English, and thus not very useful in these areas; and that it would be inconsistent with the participatory direction that had been used all along. We determined that the project should not be the gift-giver either of the books or the cash to buy them. Far more would be gained by once again sharing responsibility. If the community would get involved and take on the challenge to raise its own money to buy its own books, then it would feel a much stronger

sense of ownership of them, be in a better position to sustain the libraries by making connections with publishers and booksellers, and at the same time generate wider interest in books and reading. In discussion first with PERRP's senior management, it was agreed that if the local committees decided they wanted to go ahead with this idea, then PERRP senior management would get CDM Smith—employees as well as the firm—involved to contribute books on a matching basis and have all the books purchased in Pakistan. The social team decided to present this “library challenge” to the committees.

### ***Presenting the Challenge***

By this point in time, PERRP was holding regular workshops attended by two representatives of each committee: the head teacher (the committee's general secretary) and the community representative (the committee's chairperson). During one of these workshops, I proposed the idea of the Library Challenge to these representatives. Reviewing architects' floor plans of a few of the schools, members of the social team pointed out the library rooms and said to each audience, “When we did the survey with you a few months ago, you told us you have no library books. What do you think of the idea of having no books in these wonderful new libraries?” The answer was unanimous: “We would love to have books, but the government has none to give to us, and no budget for us to buy them.”

Speaking for the social team, I responded, “But why wait for government to do this? You have shown the project that you have very strong skills and resources in your communities. The way you have helped construction, it seems you can make anything happen! Now here is something else you can do: put together your own library!”

I told the assembled representatives that this was only an idea, and that it was completely up to them to try to get books or not. Their responses were mostly skeptical. Some were afraid to try to raise funds; some were a bit indignant, surprised, or in disbelief at having been asked. “But we are very poor!” they said. “Even before the quake, we were poor, but now we have lost everything. How can we possibly ask poor people to donate? Nobody has ever donated to a government school, so why would they start now? Money for schools is the government's responsibility!”

Members of the social team encouraged committee members to consider all the difficult things they had already achieved. They had arranged the loan of land for a temporary tent school while construction was underway, settled disputes over land ownership and other conflicts, got access to land, persuaded people and offices far outside the project to help with different hurdles, and made sure construction contractors got what they

needed. It was their hard work that helped construction go ahead on schedule—a highly unusual achievement.

Most had made up their minds that they could not go out and ask for donations for books. The social team then introduced the idea of a Library Challenge: if the committees promised to donate at least one book per student in their own school, then CDM Smith had agreed to do the same. They also explained that since the PERRP budget was for construction only, CDM Smith volunteers would also have to raise funds for their contribution of books.

With this news, the hesitancy changed rapidly, with murmurs around the room expressing surprise. “What does this mean? An engineering and construction firm is willing to donate books to us?” One of the most gregarious head teachers spoke up: “This is a wonderful offer, and we will never get this chance again to start a library. We can do this!” He spoke enthusiastically, starting to generate ideas for how they could raise funds. By the end of the day-long workshop, participants had added many ideas, building each other’s confidence. Within a few days they had taken on the challenge so seriously that they were in friendly competition with each other to see who could raise the most money and buy the most books. Their reactions went from reluctance to excitement to try, and they immediately went out to see about raising funds.

### ***Finding the Books: Organizing AJ&K’s First Bookfairs***

Still, in the social team, we were not sure what possibilities there were for books for the libraries. Libraries simply did not exist anywhere else in government schools, and we were uncertain as to where we could source books. Having books shipped from the USA or elsewhere was discounted, as shipping would be far too expensive—plus, all those books would be in English, while abilities in the language were low in these schools. Project administrative staff in the central office in Islamabad took on the task of identifying Pakistani publishers by scouring bookstores for books in Urdu for children, bringing 150 samples back to the office. From these, we compiled a list of publishers, which helped us to identify hundreds of more book titles.

Given that even the Pakistani office staff—who had been educated in the city mainly in English—expressed surprise at finding children’s books in Urdu, we wondered if the committee members and teachers would know about these. The project schools were in such remote areas, several hours from the nearest cities. When people visited the city, they tended to do so only for medical, business, or family reasons—not to go to book stores. At the next committee workshop, we laid out the 150 book sam-

ples, and even the highly experienced head teachers were astonished. In this display laid out for them, they walked around the tables, impressed and delighted—but also dismayed that they had not previously known such books existed. Anticipating their needs, we had compiled a set of fifty sample books for each school to take back to their communities to show around, so others could see the potential too and to help with their fundraising.

Six weeks later, at the next workshop, the committee members stated that, much to their surprise, raising money was not as hard as they had thought it would be. But now the big question was “Where do we buy the books?” With no local bookstores, and booksellers so far away, the social team suggested that booksellers be invited to Bagh city to hold a bookfair. Again, there was much doubt. Many wondered, “Why would book sellers come so far, over such small roads that are in such poor condition?” But soon this second hurdle of doubt was also overcome. To drum up interest in a bookfair in the communities, senior committee members joined other local people and officials to create a sixty-person organizing committee. The project became a PERRP-wide effort, with social mobilizers, engineers, office staff, and drivers all volunteering their support.

When we invited Urdu-language publishers to the bookfair, over a dozen companies responded. These publishers were aware of the higher literacy rate and potential audience in the communities, and the first-ever AJ&K bookfair was held in Bagh city in 2009, only five months after the idea of a library challenge was first discussed with the committees. Attended by eight thousand people, including busloads of children and teachers from the PERRP project, other schools, and the public, the bookfair was a wild success: the publishers sold out of books in two days. The local print media generated stories leading up to the fair, and the FM radio station, Voice of Azad Kashmir, broadcasted live from the event. The media attention drew in attendance from places far from Bagh city. To run the event—to administer first aid services, clean up, control traffic, and handle security, advertising, and logistics—we had contributions from local government, district administration, NGOs, and private-sector sponsors.

For the KP province schools, a separate bookfair was planned but had to be canceled due to security concerns. Instead, committee members went to the Lahore International Bookfair and Lahore’s historic Urdu Bazaar, where they spent all the money they had raised. This included the Library Challenge’s overall champion fundraising school: 120,000 rupees (roughly \$1,300) raised by the Government Boys’ Higher Secondary School Jared, in the remote Kaghan Valley.

By 2011, there was such a high demand for another bookfair in AJ&K that a second one was held. Because of the reputation of the first book-

fair, many more publishers applied to participate in this second event but had to be turned away due to space limitations. Over twenty-five thousand people attended the fair, and the fifteen publishers almost sold out. For four days, a ten-thousand-square-foot college gymnasium site was jammed with parents, teachers, the public, and students of all ages. Whole families, dressed in their finest clothes, attended with their children. Local officials who inaugurated and closed the event observed that this was the largest event ever held in AJ&K Bagh district, outside a religious or political rally. Local news correspondents got the bookfair into international news, and soon committee members were getting phone calls from family in the UK and Gulf States saying they had seen it covered on TV.

In preparation for this second bookfair, the reach of community organizing in Bagh had grown even wider. Motivated by results they had already seen, twenty-seven AJ&K project committees gave themselves another challenge. Instead of focusing only on getting more books for their own schools, the committees decided to try to influence other schools in the region and to each show at least two more schools how to start their own libraries. Senior committee representatives then went to other schools and did the same, showing those communities how to raise money and come to the second bookfair to buy their books. This way, libraries were started in sixty-three schools outside those built by PERRP, even without the advantage of matched book donations from CDM Smith. Again, the city of Bagh provided all the services needed, and officials attended with their families. Along with PERRP's KP province schools, a total of 116 new libraries were established—the only libraries for children in the region.

### ***Libraries Established***

In the end, the number of books purchased for libraries in PERRP-built schools was more than double the Library Challenge goal. The fifty-three project schools raised 2.3 million rupees (almost \$26,000), an enormous amount in local terms—the equivalent to 236 months (nineteen years!) of a typical teacher's salary. Maybe even more significant is that one book cost, on average, over half a day's income for a poor family. With these realities, for the 17,000 students altogether, the committees bought and donated 24,000 books, while CDM Smith and friends donated another 40,000 books. These were the first libraries in local government schools, and some opened their use to the community.

Following the bookfair, the agenda of the next committee workshop was an unusual and satisfying exercise: to analyze why the Library Challenge had been so successful. Participants concluded it depended on many factors. The first was the motivation received from the social team.

It helped that committee members were already known and respected, so they were able to go out into the community and ask for donations—and, in the process, spread wide awareness about the Library Challenge. People were also more interested to donate for a cause that was concrete and finite—to purchase one book for each student—and the books would be visible to everyone in the new school. In many cases, a further benefit had come when, upon request by the committees, imams made announcements at the mosques to encourage donations, adding to the awareness raising and providing an endorsement. For many, this was a legitimization, recalling the Quran and how it repeatedly urges Muslims to learn, get an education, and *ikra* (read)!

Following best practices for development proposed by scholars like Anderson and Woodrow (1989), PERRP focused almost exclusively on the strengths of the communities, encouraging the people to recognize their own capacities and to put them to work. These communities, like others, have certain strengths—pride in their kin, faith, and culture—even where there are many differences among their people. While the community members may know their own problems better than anyone else, it sometimes takes a catalyst for people to recognize their strengths, resources, and other capacities. However, sometimes it takes outsiders to recognize and encourage those capacities; encouraging poor communities can make their desires a reality.

The Library Challenge may have been a textbook example of community empowerment, but it was also just another step in a series of achievements that many people had doubted would be possible. First challenged with helping construction, each committee achieved one difficult task after another, each time building confidence. Such empowerment is the most important result of an effective mobilization process.

At community-wide celebrations to inaugurate each new school, which were attended by hundreds or even thousands of people, representatives spoke about how their participation had helped take them out of the despair and hopelessness they had felt following the earthquake. Frequently heard in speeches and conversations with committee members was the notion that “[PERRP] and the Library Challenge has got us organized, given us new hope and skills and made us now think of the future. Now we can do anything!”

However, as discussed, not long after the PERRP project was completed, the committees ceased to function as they had during the project. Although intentions had been expressed and some preparations made to continue the committees as well as the bookfairs, old competition and the power structures took over again. In any case, at least until PERRP was



**Figure 7.1.** The Book Fairs. As part of the Library Challenge, PERRP and the committees organized two major book fairs, the first such events in AJ&K. Here at one of the book fairs in Bagh, students, teachers, families, and the general public attended to see, buy, and donate books to their schools, 2011. © Nadeem Anjum Kiani.

completed, the libraries were still intact and used. Capacities built could be used in other development and people's expectations were no doubt raised of what can be achieved by working together.

### ***Library Challenge Notes***

Each committee made its own fundraising plan. As prominent community members, they called on the wealthy, petitioned the shop owners in the bazaar, contacted alumni, had announcements made at Friday prayers asking for donations, sold odds and ends around the school, and had teachers, parents, and students contribute. Each school got hundreds of donations, even from the poorest parents, who gave perhaps one to five rupees. Some children even gave their pocket money.

All the books were new and most were published in Pakistan. About 80 percent were in Urdu, and 20 percent in English. Schools bought the subjects of their choice. The books donated by CDM Smith were chosen by social team members. Titles were not selected based on the curriculum; instead, subjects were chosen for the fun and enjoyment of reading. The books provided included general knowledge books, reference books (dic-



tionaries, atlases, etc.), and books about the world, people, technology, households, science, health, the earth and earthquakes, art and design, nature, the environment, Islamic history, Pakistani history, sports, and language, along with jokebooks, storybooks, books of poems, and books with primary-level alphabets and numbers.

### **PERRP Staff Fundraising**

Engineers in PERRP approached the Pakistani companies contracted to construct the schools and suggested they could give back by making cash donations to sponsor libraries in the schools they were building. Books for nineteen of the libraries were funded this way. From events at different embassies in Islamabad, from CDM offices in the USA, and from friends and relatives in many countries, PERRP staff raised funds from individuals by having them sponsor sets of books to be donated. Several project suppliers—including concrete, travel, and stationary—also made cash donations to buy and donate books.

### **Library Management Training**

As government schools in Pakistan usually have no libraries, the project schools had no experience with library management. To address this in the most realistic way, guidelines on library management and monitoring were drawn up from participatory exercises. First, teachers and committee members were asked about having a library: What might the problems be? What would they worry about? How could they prevent or solve those problems? What would they need to do so? Who would monitor the library? When and how could they monitor it? Their answers were turned into guidelines made by the committees and schools themselves. Over the remaining time of PERRP, these self-made guidelines were used to set up and manage the libraries, and to do periodic self-assessments.

Each school set up its own borrowing and lending system, and its volunteer librarian was trained by the Punjab Library Resource Center. For schools still operating in tents before the new school was completed, their books were kept in metal storage boxes that were carried to a central point for the students to borrow books.

### **Library Days**

Important to ongoing management and sustainability of the libraries was community knowledge of what books they could expect to see in the library. Committees acted as hosts at the schools' Library Days for community members whose donations had stocked the shelves. Library Day visitors were invited to look through the collection and come back again to read books themselves.

## Related Activities

The Library Challenge introduced many different kinds of reading and related activities in the schools, such as students making, writing, and illustrating their own little books. An art project was introduced where students were asked to draw either their new school or what they saw at their old school on the day of the earthquake. In 2012, for the seventh anniversary of the quake, a selection of the two thousand entries received was exhibited at the National Art Gallery in Islamabad.

## Impact

The Library Challenge made no attempt to measure the impact it had on reading, but even on unannounced visits to schools, PERRP staff could see students reading. We could hear the buzz in the libraries and classrooms as students carried out a wide range of reading activities: weekly or daily reading periods; displays of books that showed what was available; library art with drawings and slogans about reading; and students' own self-authored, self-made books of nonfiction, stories, and poems. Sometimes community members visited the school to read to classes. At other times, students read aloud to their peers and to younger children. Most such activities were new in these underfunded government schools.

## Comments about the Library Challenge

**School Management Committee Chairman:** I like reading, but before this, nobody was aware of the importance of school libraries. With the books our community has donated now, along with those from the Library Challenge project, we will have a great collection even in this remote village.

**Student in a Boys' High School:** We have over 3,000 books in this library, and I'm going to read them all.

**Teachers at the Government Boys' Primary School Mohandri, Khaghan Valley:** We have never seen the students so excited. The only books they had seen before were their textbooks. Now they look at these new books full of color and pictures and they are surprised that they are able to read books they had not seen before!

**Psychologist Working in Postdisaster Trauma Counseling, Bagh, AJ&K:** The bookfair was likely the most fun many people have had since the

earthquake. Such fun and recalling it for weeks and months to come will help heal the trauma that many people are still suffering.



### **First Student Donation to the Library Challenge**

At Besuti, a girls' middle school at high altitude in a snowbound area, students attended school for the first year after the quake in a large tent, which was supplied by PERRP while construction was being prepared. One day, the school's SMC was using a corner of the tent classroom for a meeting space and was talking about the Library Challenge. A few of the students nearby overheard the talk about books and wanted to know more, so committee members explained that they were going to try to get money to start a library at their new school. These little girls were so excited by the idea of having books that, on the spot, they took out all their pocket money and handed it over to the members. The twenty-five girls, aged five to twelve, donated the first 250 Pakistani rupees (roughly \$1.25) for this school's new library. Of all the schools, it was the first student donation in the whole Library Challenge.



### **“Look! I Can Read This!”**

Working in education-related fields, it is common to hear about poorly trained teachers and the resulting poor performance of their students. It is also a common complaint that students know only rote learning: memorizing without understanding. But the Library Challenge proved that wasn't entirely true. One of my fondest memories of this was at one of the most remote schools.

In my work as head of PERRP's social component, and as the founder of the Library Challenge, I frequently traveled from construction site to construction site to meet with social mobilizers, committees, and engineers, to discuss the progress of any community-related issues. I also visited the schools wherever they were operating, in their tent school or in their newly completed building.

In the earliest days, when the committees were only starting to establish their libraries, I often carried a box of brightly colored Urdu primary books that students had never seen before. This experience happened first in the third-grade class at Mohandri school in KP province, but it was repeated in many others. As I sat with the students on the floor, the books were distributed to each student, and we asked them to quickly look through them and tell us what they saw. All children eagerly did as asked, then one boy jumped to his feet and blurted out, “Look! I can read this!” He then proceeded excit-

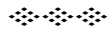
edly and proudly to read aloud each page. Many other students followed with the same eagerness. Until then, the only books they'd seen in their lives were their textbooks, which they may very well have memorized. But being able to read new, unfamiliar material was a revelation to them. This was the first time they may have understood that reading was a skill that could be transferred to something outside the textbook. It was likely the first time many understood the actual reason for learning how to read.



### First Books Ever Owned

Sometimes we'd sit outside [of the bookfair] watching the masses of people eager to get inside or leave. One image sticks in my mind: a father and three children under about six years of age exited the large hall where the fair was held, each one carrying their own little plastic bag with a few books in it to take home. All were dressed in their old, worn-out, but finest clothes, and were clearly excited and proud. This would have been the first time any of them would have owned their own books, and somehow the poor father had found a few rupees to buy his children these gifts.

—PERRP social mobilizer



### Roadside Chat about Books

The spring after all the books were delivered to the schools, I made a trip with the social team up the Kaghan Valley to visit several schools and talk with committee members, teachers, students, engineers, and local people about how everything was going. Had the new libraries got up and running? What did everybody have to say about the books? About reading? There were rave reviews, but I was concerned that much of that could have been people saying what they thought should be said.

On our way back down out of the valley on the narrow dirt road, which was barely wide enough for two cars to pass, we suddenly were stopped by the spring migration of *ghujars* (pastoralists) bringing their enormous flocks of sheep up the road and into the mountains to graze for the summer. We were stuck in sheep gridlock, when teenage boys in school uniforms began arriving on foot, struggling uphill and squeezing in with the slow-moving densely packed flock. The boys were on their daily trek home from the school, which was about three miles downhill.

As soon as the students recognized my car, which they'd seen a number of times at their school, a group of five boys fought their way through the mass

of sheep to come and greet me at my car window. Taking this opportunity, with them being away from their teachers and so able speak frankly, I asked them about their library and books. What did they think of them? Always polite, they said all the right complimentary things—so, to test them further I asked, “Okay, which books have each of you looked at and like?”

A shouting match ensued over the sheep and the dust they were raising, as the boys proved they really did know what was in their libraries. “I like the books on astronomy.” “Pakistan heroes and the ones about raising chickens!” “I’ve read all the novels already, the Urdu ones and the English ones.” “I borrowed the one called *Where There is No Doctor* and took it home and read parts of it to my mother because she can’t read.” “I want more books on Islamic history. Can you get us more of those?” “I’ve read only the joke books, and now I’m writing down other jokes people tell me and I’ll make a book of those too.”

They all aced my test. Like all the other schools, these students had seen only textbooks before and had no idea other kinds of books existed, let alone ones they liked so much.



### **“But My Sons Won’t Even Read Their Syllabus Books!”**

When you first introduced the idea of the Library Challenge, I had my doubts as to whether anybody would get interested in reading. I told you that my teenage sons are lazy students and won’t even read their syllabus books, so how could they ever get interested in library books? You told me, maybe they won’t read because their textbooks are boring to them, and for the library, we have to find books that will interest them a lot.

Well, let me tell you this, now they pester me all the time to buy them books! They have read everything you put in the library on technical subjects which are not taught in the schools, like motorcycle and cell phone repair, welding, carpentry, growing trees, keeping bees, and even cooking—and now they want more of these books!

—Committee chairman

