[**Legacy of hope**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1714423/legacy-of-hope)

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The writer is an architect.

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AKHTAR Hameed Khan, the renowned Pakistani social scientist, and father of the world-famous Comilla Cooperatives, passed away on Oct 9, 1999, in the US. His body was brought back to Karachi and buried in the compound of the Orangi Pilot Project Research and Training Institute (OPP-RTI), his first and last urban development project, 23 years ago today.

Akhtar Hameed Khan has left behind a huge legacy. The OPP-RTI sanitation project was replicated in many countries in Africa, Central Asia, and South and Southeast Asia. When he asked me to come to the OPP in 1981 to discuss the problems he was facing in developing a technology for his sanitation project, he said to me that only a technology that could be afforded by the people of Orangi would serve the requirements of what he had in mind. I soon realised that in his thinking if the technology could be afforded by the people, we could have a national programme. If it had to function even partially on government finance, it could only, at best, be a number of subsidised projects.

We were able to develop such a technology and the sanitation project — which in Pakistan, till 2018, had served more than 180,636 households. It became famous all over the world in different forms. Many of these replication projects received international awards, and so did the OPP-RTI and some of the professionals who worked for it.

In addition to the work in Orangi, the most important application of his structure of thinking has been applied by his friend and student, Shoaib Sultan Khan, to the work being carried out on an enormous scale by the RSPNs, consisting of the National Rural Support Programme, the Sindh Rural Support Organisation, and their Balochistan and KP counterparts. These projects are changing the face of poverty in Pakistan, and their most important aspect is the empowerment of women through the creation of women’s organisations and their involvement in developing and managing savings, infrastructure and their day-to-day affairs.

For Akhtar Hameed Khan, small projects were islands of hope.

However, apart from these large projects, there is another aspect of his legacy. As a result of working with him at the OPP-RTI, young community members have participated in and understood his structure of thinking and work methodology. They have set up their own organisations and are working with local communities in developing sanitation, housing, education, and women’s saving programmes.

One such project is the Technical Training Research Center (TTRC). It is run by a young man called Muhammad Sirajuddin. He joined the OPP in 1994 as an intern and was paid Rs30 per day. Since his interest was in housing, he was trained in mapping, fieldwork, and light and ventilation for homes. This training, like most of OPP-RTI trainings, consisted of learning by doing. Being worried by the fact that he had no technical qualifications, he joined Saifee College (Polytechnic) in 1997 and received a diploma. In 1997, the OPP decided to help Siraj in establishing an independent practice. This was the beginning of the TTRC. The OPP gave Siraj space, a drawing table and a drafting board, and he started to provide plans in consultancy to those Orangi homes and institutions who wish to build their homes, schools, or other construction and charged a small fee for it. Soon, Siraj acquired his own premises and became a consultant to the OPP-RTI for mapping and OPP’s house improvement and education programmes. In the 2010 floods, he provided technical and logistic support to the OPP’s flood relief and rehabilitation project.

Today, the TTRC has a staff of nine persons, of which two are women from Orangi. The persons who work with Siraj now were originally also unqualified, but they, too, have acquired qualifications at relevant institutions and poly­technics.

Siraj supports com­munities in buil­ding their sanitation in the same manner in which the OPP-RTI has done since 1982. His clientele is increasing, and in the floods and demolitions for homes in the various nullahs of Karachi, he was asked by communities to develop alternative plans from government ones. He did this, and in the process, saved a large number of homes from demolition.

Apart from Siraj, many persons who have worked with the OPP-RTI have initiated their own organisations. Another such organisation is the Akhtar Hameed Khan Memorial Trust. They have developed a solid waste management system which is being promoted and accepted by local government agencies and NGOs all over Pakistan. Here again, the principles of research and extension are drawn from Akhtar Hameed Khan’s work.

Akhtar Hameed Khan said very often that these small projects are islands of hope in a sea of turmoil and that if they kept going, they would change the face of Pakistan.

The finest gift that we can give to Akhtar Hameed Khan’s legacy is to help the creation of such small, sustainable institutions countrywide.

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